

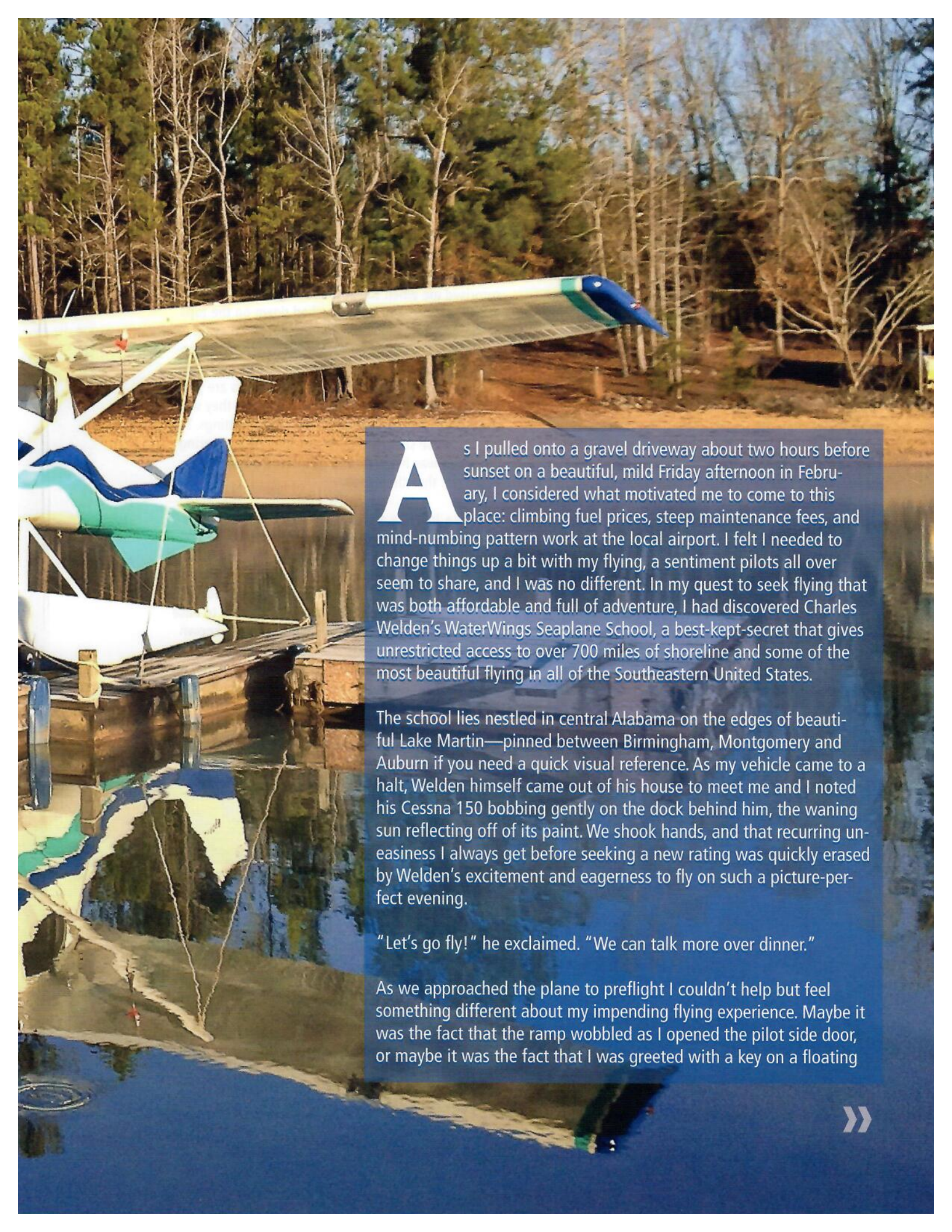


FEATURE

JUST ADD WATER

Story by John Braun

Photos Courtesy of WaterWings Seaplane School



As I pulled onto a gravel driveway about two hours before sunset on a beautiful, mild Friday afternoon in February, I considered what motivated me to come to this place: climbing fuel prices, steep maintenance fees, and mind-numbing pattern work at the local airport. I felt I needed to change things up a bit with my flying, a sentiment pilots all over seem to share, and I was no different. In my quest to seek flying that was both affordable and full of adventure, I had discovered Charles Welden's WaterWings Seaplane School, a best-kept-secret that gives unrestricted access to over 700 miles of shoreline and some of the most beautiful flying in all of the Southeastern United States.

The school lies nestled in central Alabama on the edges of beautiful Lake Martin—pinned between Birmingham, Montgomery and Auburn if you need a quick visual reference. As my vehicle came to a halt, Welden himself came out of his house to meet me and I noted his Cessna 150 bobbing gently on the dock behind him, the waning sun reflecting off of its paint. We shook hands, and that recurring uneasiness I always get before seeking a new rating was quickly erased by Welden's excitement and eagerness to fly on such a picture-perfect evening.

"Let's go fly!" he exclaimed. "We can talk more over dinner."

As we approached the plane to preflight I couldn't help but feel something different about my impending flying experience. Maybe it was the fact that the ramp wobbled as I opened the pilot side door, or maybe it was the fact that I was greeted with a key on a floating





leash and a life vest in the pilot's seat. More likely, it was the fact that I was about to venture into a realm of flying I had only seen in the movies and on the television shows; one I spent many an hour thinking about as I flew land-locked aircraft over lakes and rivers. I had heard rumors about the glamour of float flying—the unencumbered freedom you feel and the excitement you get from being a bush aviator, driving an airplane around on floats, landing wherever you please. As it later turned out, everything I had heard and seen was true, and then some.

Welden walked me through a thorough and informative preflight, allowing me the privilege to work the bilge pump, sump the tanks, check the underneath attachment points, stick the oil, and clamber onto the wings for a visual fuel check. It is important to note that Welden's 150 has an upgraded engine that turns out 150HP, and while it can lift two men off the water with ease, weight and balance are just as important on water as on land.

With the preflight complete, Welden hopped in while I managed the dock rope and allowed the airplane to point into the gentle breeze we had that day. As I soon learned over the next day-and-a-half, because there is no friction between the wheels and a runway in the form of brakes, everything about float flying revolves around the wind and the direction from which it is coming. The airplane has a natural tendency to weathervane, meaning the movement of air will naturally exert a force on the tail and turn the nose

into the wind. I donned my life vest, inserted the key in the ignition, adjusted my headset, and prepared to cast off.

I held the dock rope between my legs (in the event the engine wouldn't start), primed the engine, and turned the key over. I had expected it, but it still surprised me when the airplane began to travel forward—even at 700 rpm. I pushed down on the tops of the pedals to stop our progress but to no avail. I took a quick glance over at Welden to see if he'd noticed my embarrassing action. If he did, he certainly didn't let on. On the surface, water rudders are your primary form of steering, and on the C-150 they were surprisingly effective, even at low power settings. The run-up, while simple, is done moving. After clearing the area I was instructed to give it full power so I eased the throttle forward.

The nose, just like a boat, shot skyward, and even after straining my neck I couldn't see directly ahead of us. Good thing we visually cleared the area, a habit that is of utmost importance in operating on a lake or waterway. As we gained power the nose settled, and with a little coaching from Welden I was able to ease the Cessna onto a sweet spot, more formally known as "the step." The step is the area of a float where drag is minimized, essential to allowing the floats to separate from the water. As my airspeed came alive and approached rotation speed, I applied gentle back-pressure out of habit. Without warning, we got a shake in the airplane and it seemed to settle back





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ence staring me back in the windshield. I feel like I am destined to make contact with it, so I instinctively add a little power and pull back.

"Leave it where you had it," Welden chimed in from my right. "It's looking good."

The outcropping passed just below us and off to my left and immediately my attention turns to obtaining that perfect, slightly nose high pitch to put the 150 in about 100FPM descent, done by setting power at roughly 1900 rpm. There it is. Out of the corner of my eye I can see the water and trees going by, so I begin to flare. I catch myself right as I hear no flare from Welden's calm voice on my right. My eyes dart to my VSI, -150FPM. That will work fine. The corners of my eyes peek outside again.

Stop doing that, I chastised myself silently.

Eyes back to the horizon. About that time, the floats kiss the water and I get the now-familiar sensation as if we just landed on foam-covered wax paper. The water slowly but smoothly increases its friction on the floats, reducing our speed quickly.

Remember to keep the stick back, I repeat in my head.

Not only is keeping the stick back while on the water safe practice in a seaplane, not doing it is one of the

few things that can bust you on a check ride. The plane carved its way across the glass, eventually coming to a slow crawl on the water.

"Nice job," Welden commented from the right seat. "You're ready for tomorrow."

The check-ride, strangely enough, is one of the highlights of the weekend. The examiner has a passion for general aviation and float flying in general, and he is just as excited to fly that day as you have been all weekend. The oral portion of the exam consists of





in the water and lose airspeed; I had increased drag by taking the plane off the step.

"Just hold it on the step," Welden coached, "it will fly itself off when it's ready."

Sure enough, once back on the step it gave a final lurch as the floats broke free, and we climbed skyward.

With daylight fading we spent the next hour doing basic maneuvers: stalls, steep turns, and slow-flight, just to get a feel for the airplane and the new aerodynamics of having the increased drag from the floats. The plane handled well with no major, drastic changes, and the maneuvers could be easily learned with only verbal advice from Welden in the right seat. At first you may notice the sensation of "dragging" around the landing gear, but after a few minutes behind the yoke you become accustomed to it and the feeling is soon forgotten. The Cessna 150 holds a reputation for its simplicity, reliability, and controllability, and the same holds true for its water-based counterpart. Even low-time pilots can expect a very easy and stress-free transition to the 150 on floats.

The remainder of the training concentrates around the landings, and by good fortune the next day we were presented with light winds out of the north that provided perfect conditions for a new seaplane pilot

to train. The unique geography of Lake Martin and its many coves and inlets allows a pilot to experience completely different conditions that are separated only by a few seconds of flying time. Expect to complete somewhere in the neighborhood of 30 landings over the course of the day, done with manageable sessions and interrupted by a nice fly-in lunch. With no traffic, radio calls, and patterns at just 300'-500' above the water, landings happen fast and efficiently.

For most pilots the "glassy water" landing is the most awkward, and takes the most time to get used to. I certainly proved to be no exception to this rule. As it turns out, all the books, magazines, and videos describing calm water and its illusionary and reflective properties are spot-on. There is simply no way to judge your height above calm, reflective water. Just as crosswinds are to a new pilot, so too are the glassy water landings to a new seaplane pilot—but don't worry. It just takes a little practice, and they actually provide the smoothest landings when done correctly.

As the sun began its final descent in the West and the winds had calmed for the evening, I set up for one final landing before my check ride the next day. At 500' AWL and with my area clear, I visualize my glassy-water landing approach: flaps 20 degrees, carb heat on, aim for my final visual approach point. As I descend closer to the water I see my visual land refer-



pertinent, straight-forward questions, followed by a brief check ride that focuses on the safety elements of float plane flying. The examiner will most likely want to see you demonstrate a few landings, exercise good decision making in an engine-out scenario, and be mindful of the operation of the plane while on the water.

So what can you expect to pay for a weekend of float flying? Welden currently offers the course for \$1,200, which includes the check ride—truly a bargain in today's era of general aviation. Expect to receive four to six hours of dual, an amount of time that should have you feeling more than adequately prepared for the examination. Additional training, if desired or required, is of course available. Now,

throw in a few extras: relaxed atmosphere, incredibly fun, and challenging. Sound too good to be true? Well for once, it's not.

What makes Welden's school appealing and unique is that he can accommodate just about any type of student seeking a Single-Engine-Seaplane (SES) rating, the process is relaxing and fun, and it only takes two days to get the rating. The accommodations are easy, the access is unlimited, and the flying is unlike anything you've ever done.

Welden has added a Husky A-1B on amphibians to his fleet, which accommodates an ATP (SES) rating if that's what you might need. ☺



For more information, visit the website at www.waterwings.com.

Writer John Braun standing next to the Cessna 150 he earned his Single Engine Seaplane (SES) rating in.