

# AOPA FLIGHT TRAINING

A GOOD PILOT IS ALWAYS LEARNING

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## Annual College Aviation Review

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# Floatplane lessons

A career course over land and sea *By Mark Twombly*



The course to a successful career as an airline pilot can take some interesting vectors. Take Michael Chauff. He enrolled in Louisiana Tech University's professional aviation degree program, with a minor in aviation management. His goals were typical: graduate, build time and experience, and then someday fly for an airline, preferably Republic. Today, nearly three years after graduating, he's still in the building-experience phase, but with a twist—he's now getting that experience by flying seaplanes.

I met Chauff at Southern Seaplane Inc., a commercial seaplane operator based in Belle Chasse, Louisiana, on the west bank of the Mississippi River just outside New Orleans. Southern Seaplane was founded in 1954 by Phil Panepinto to serve the burgeoning oil industry in south Louisiana. Panepinto used floatplanes to fly customers directly to oil drilling rigs that rise from the flat, soggy marshland that defines the southernmost region of the state.

Southern still services inland oil rigs, but it also takes New Orleans-area tourists and conventioners on floatplane sightseeing flights, and it has contracts to deliver cancelled checks to various Louisiana and Mississippi cities. Check hauling was Chauff's entry to Southern.

After graduating from Louisiana Tech and instructing at a few area flight schools, Chauff heard from a friend who worked for Southern Seaplane that the company was looking for pilots for its afternoon check runs. In January 2006 he interviewed with Lyle Panepinto, Phil's son who now owns the company. Southern hired him a few months later.

Thus began his journey through Southern's in-house pilot development program. After flying cancelled checks for a year to build experience, Chauff could

transition into Southern's straight-float and amphibious seaplanes.

Over the years Southern Seaplane has found it difficult to locate pilots with the training and experience to operate safely and efficiently in southern Louisiana's unique seaplane environment. Pilots contend daily with shallow salt water, narrow canals, lots of boat traffic, and unusual docking situations—oil rigs, tugboats, and barges. Lyle Panepinto's answer was to grow the pilots internally.

He's had good experience hiring young college graduates with aviation degrees and professional flight training, and he is especially complimentary of Louisiana Tech's graduates.

The new hires begin with the check runs, flying company-owned Cessna 210s and 206s (all on wheels—no floats). On VFR days they fly single pilot. When conditions dictate IFR, they ride with an experienced pilot, observing from the right



Michael Chauff and a Southern Seaplane Cessna.

seat on the Part 135 legs, and flying from the left seat on Part 91 legs. Once they have logged 1,200 hours total time, they are cleared to fly single-pilot IFR Part 135 trips. That's the first upgrade.

As they draw close to that 1,200-hour landmark, they also become eligible for the second part of Southern's pilot development program. "Now we teach them to fly a floatplane," Panepinto says. Transitioning to floats means completing a formal, structured training regimen under the supervision of Southern's experienced seaplane instructors, led by Panepinto.

The training includes two to three months of ground school and flight training. "We turn them loose when they are able to complete a set of tasks—48 of them," Panepinto explains. The tasks cover docking procedures and floatplane flying techniques. Here's a sample of

what the student must demonstrate in docking: laying alongside a dock; crosswind approaches to nose-in docking; normal, downwind, and upwind approaches; crew boat tie-ups; piling tie-ups; how to tie up to a boat that is adrift; sailing or backing into a bank; and tying up in a current.

For seaplane flying techniques, students must show that they can safely perform such maneuvers as 90-degree step turns; crosswind landings in 20-knot-plus winds; downwind takeoffs and landings; turning the aircraft 180 degrees when taxiing downwind; negotiating a narrow canal; and rig calls (flying to and docking at an oil rig), including in rough water. The tasks amount to a set of practical test standards that, when demonstrated successfully, clear a pilot to fly a Southern Seaplane floatplane.

When we talked, Chauff was just about to complete his transition into commercial floatplane flying. "I've enjoyed all the training," he says, adding that some of the docking procedures were a little tough to master.

Southern's training, upgrade, and line-flying program gives pilots solid experience in cross-country, IFR, and commercial operations in both land and seaplanes. More important, it instills the kind of informed decision-making and judgment that will serve pilots like Chauff well throughout their careers.

For example, an important part of the training is embracing Panepinto's self-described "Golden Rules" of floatplane flying. The rules speak to the many differences between flying a landplane off paved runways versus taking off and landing on water. One of his never-forget rules is to always look for a way to take off from a location before landing there. In other words, you may be able to land in one spot but, because of winds or some other factor, you may have to take off someplace else—and you better have that "someplace else" picked out before landing.

It's a lesson Chauff had just learned. "Yesterday we landed in a canal," he told me, "and I had to taxi for two miles to get to a longer takeoff area." 

*Mark Twombly is a writer and editor who has been flying since 1968. He is a commercial pilot with instrument and multiengine ratings and co-owner of a Piper Aztec.*

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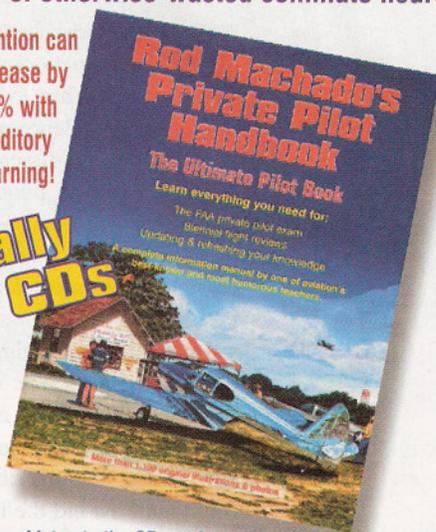
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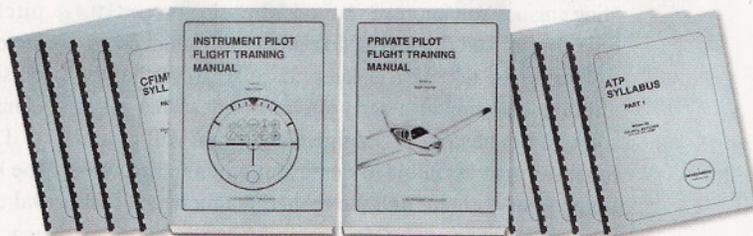
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