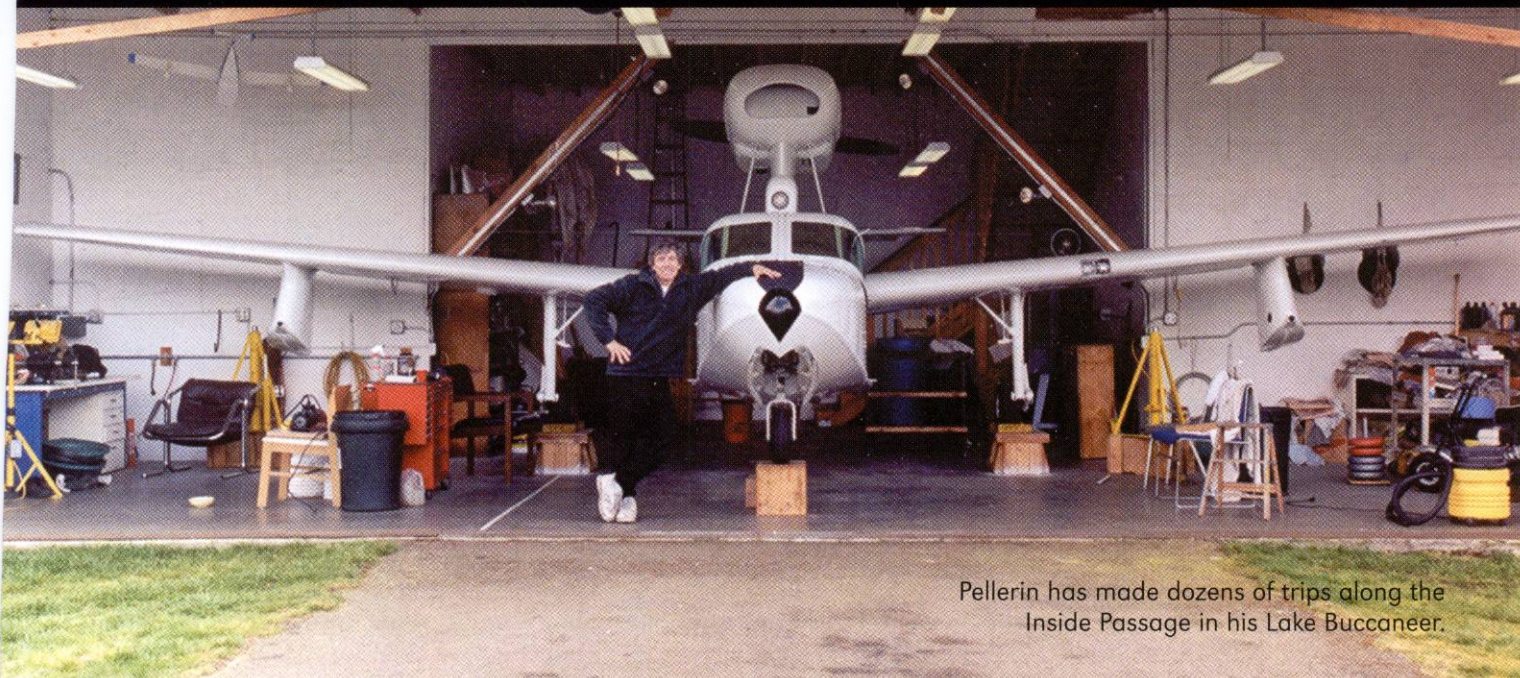


In the Blind — on the — Inside Passage

Story and Photos by Richard Pellerin



Pellerin has made dozens of trips along the Inside Passage in his Lake Buccaneer.

Learning to live with low viz



This is the second of two articles about flying an LA4-200 Lake Buccaneer on the Inside Passage from northern Washington state to Juneau and back. The Seaplane Pilots Association and Water Flying magazine in no way advocate or endorse low-visibility flying in a seaplane or any other type of aircraft. This story is simply intended to be an honest and sobering account of how a pilot with extensive experience prepares for and minimizes the risks associated with flying in the presence of a hostile combination of wilderness, mountainous terrain, and unforgiving weather.

Flying into low-visibility weather on the Inside Passage route is not something I do unknowingly. I always have at least some warning. I've had to negotiate my way through ceilings as low as 100 feet and visibilities as low as one-quarter of a mile, and I've learned that the old adage to "never take your airplane where your mind hasn't been five minutes before" needs to be adjusted downward to 15 seconds before. That's about how much time I've got before arriving at the end of one-quarter-mile visibility.

It is low visibilities, not low ceilings, that get my attention. The lower the visibility, the slower I wish

I could get my airplane to fly. It's why I recently installed vortex generators on my Lake.

For those of you who think it is illegal and suicidal to be flying in those conditions, remember that in uncontrolled airspace, which is what you're flying in up there, it is legal. You are responsible for your own navigation and terrain and traffic avoidance. You must be instrument rated and meet IFR recent experience requirements. Your airplane must be current in terms of IFR certification as well.

That said, don't kid yourself. Flying in these conditions is very serious business. Despite having numerous encounters with this kind of flying, my pulse always quickens and my palms always get sweaty when I find myself once again struggling along in the gloomy world of low ceilings and visibility.

I'm certainly not suggesting that anyone take off in such weather. However, if I spend several days in a forest service cabin unable to see anything beyond a few hundred yards out the door, and then one day I can finally see a mile down the lake and 300 feet up the ridge bordering the lake, believe me, cabin fever will make me go. However, once en route back to civilization I may well encounter lower ceilings and visibilities.

Cabin fever can provide the incentive to depart in low visibility conditions, but not without extensive preparation and a way out.



SEE THE SALT WATER

Most of these remote lakes are near the salt water and only a few hundred feet above them. Departing in bad weather absolutely and unequivocally requires that I be able to see the salt water at the outbound end of the lake. It may have taken me two hours to break camp, load the plane in the rain, and complete all the rest of the preparations. But if after lifting off the visibility is too low to see the salt water beyond, I must turn back to the cabin. Operating with that kind of ceiling and viz means I fly either over the water at all times, or in clear view of how to get back to it. No exceptions.

My rules for getting into a lake in low ceilings and viz limit me to lakes I've

landed on before and am familiar with. I never close the back door by losing visual to the body of water I'm leaving until I can clearly see the next body of water ahead.

When I'm setting up for the approach I'm mindful of surface definition. It's much easier in low conditions to dig a wing tip in a steep turn or even hit the water prematurely. So, no steep turns, keep the ball centered, and be prepared to set down on very short notice.

I've also had to develop techniques for negotiating low weather en route on my Inside Passage journeys. A typical scenario is that conditions are marginal VFR, and looking ahead I see a wall of white that seems to drop right down to the water. First, if I haven't already reconfigured the airplane, I do so now:

flaps down, mixture full rich, prop pitch flat. Most of the time I also turn the boost pump on for backup.

Next, I descend to about 100 feet off the water and pick up a one-quarter-mile turning radius off the shoreline. (At that speed the turning radius of the airplane is about one-quarter mile.) I turn toward the shoreline and make a 360-degree arc, re-entering the gloom. I make this circling entry into the reduced visibility to get a sense of what I'm dealing with. It gives me time to clam down, evaluate, and make a decision on whether or not to continue.

Usually, at a quarter-mile offshore and about 100 feet in the air the foggy shoreline is visible and capable of being followed. If I lose forward visibility beyond about my 10:30 or 1:30 position

(depending on whether the shoreline is to my left or right), I can do a shallow turn towards the shore. That's where the quarter-mile spacing comes into play, and that's why I don't want to be flying directly over the shoreline in these conditions.

LOW VIZ = CALM WATER

Once I'm inside the outer barrier islands, landing and step-taxing is one of my options in low-viz, calm-water conditions. Usually, very low viz means calm air and calm water, especially during the summer months when I'm apt to be making the trip.

I don't have this option when flying along the open sea coast. Even on a calm day open sea swell is to be avoided. On occasion I've been in my sailboat off the west side of Vancouver Island and seen high winds and very low ceilings and visibilities. It's never happened while flying, fortunately, because that would be a very serious situation indeed. In that instance I think I'd head for the nearest protected water and put down.

If I've been out in the wilderness for some time and out of radio contact, I don't know the current altimeter setting. Or I might have been on a lake for awhile and the barometer fell. So, en route I set the altimeter to zero while flying just above the surface of the salt water. The zero reading on the gauge is now as low as I can go and not touch the water.

A word about leaving the shoreline. Generally speaking, in low conditions I don't. If I start out across a stretch of open water with no shoreline visible, it becomes very challenging to know just exactly when I'll come up on the next shoreline, or even where it is.

Navigation with two aboard is easier than being alone. The left-seater then has only to fly the airplane. The right-seater has the harder job of keeping the airplane on the chart (keep us from getting lost). But, these days, I'm usually by myself. The world of yoke-mounted GPS with moving map displays has simplified navigation. But if I wouldn't fly into something without it, I need to ask myself if I really want to fly into it with it.

The database does not have every last little island with a 100-foot-tall tree on it. And it never has the ship with the



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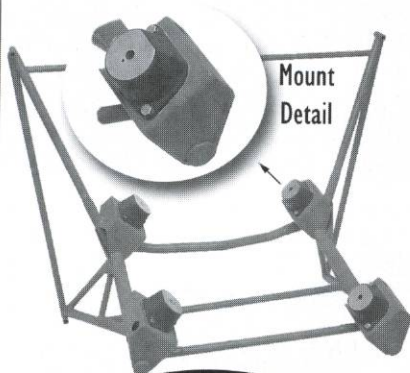
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150-foot-tall mast. Also, what if I lose the signal or the box packs up? Basic pilotage skills and, as always, keeping my cool are most necessary in these conditions.

I try not to over-focus on the GPS (which is always in my line of vision on the yoke). My eyes should be focused outside most of the time, momentarily checking the GPS display (set up at half-mile range in low-viz conditions) to confirm my position. I always have the sectional on my lap ready to be viewed if necessary.

I also carry a marine hand-held VHF radio. Once down on the water in this kind of weather, the ability to communicate with a passing boat comes in very handy. If I'm in some kind of difficulty it's nice to be able to talk to the Coast Guard, too.

CLEAR WINDSHIELD

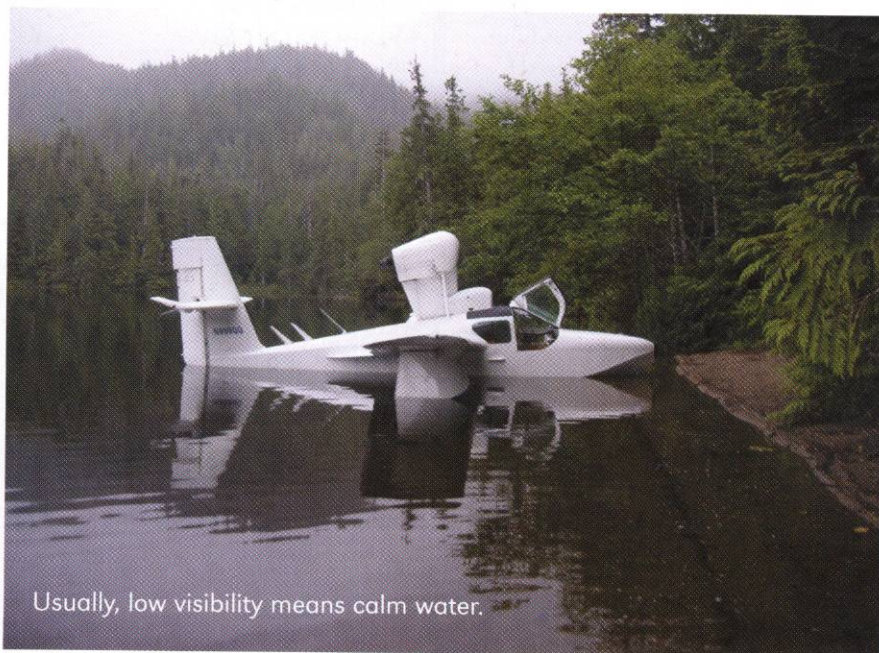
The last topic to be discussed is my windshield. Any flying boat or twin-engine floatplane operates under the distinct disadvantage of not having propwash to keep the windshield clear, especially in heavy precip. To compensate, I maintain the heater in the Lake and keep it on to dry the air on the pilot's side of the windscreen. I also apply a windshield treatment to bead and disperse the water. Lastly, I never venture into low conditions without a roll of paper towels at hand to periodically wipe moisture off the windshield,

especially until the cabin warms up. I don't find the defroster fan of much use in these conditions.

A final observation: No matter how tempting it is to climb up into that gloom and file IFR, with rare exception I don't even think about it. The instrument approaches are hundreds of miles apart in places, often have high minimums, and there's a lot of cumulo granite between me and them. The icing and turbulence up there are legendary. Get into that and I've crossed off my last option, namely, landing on the water. I'd rather deal with what I have down on the deck.

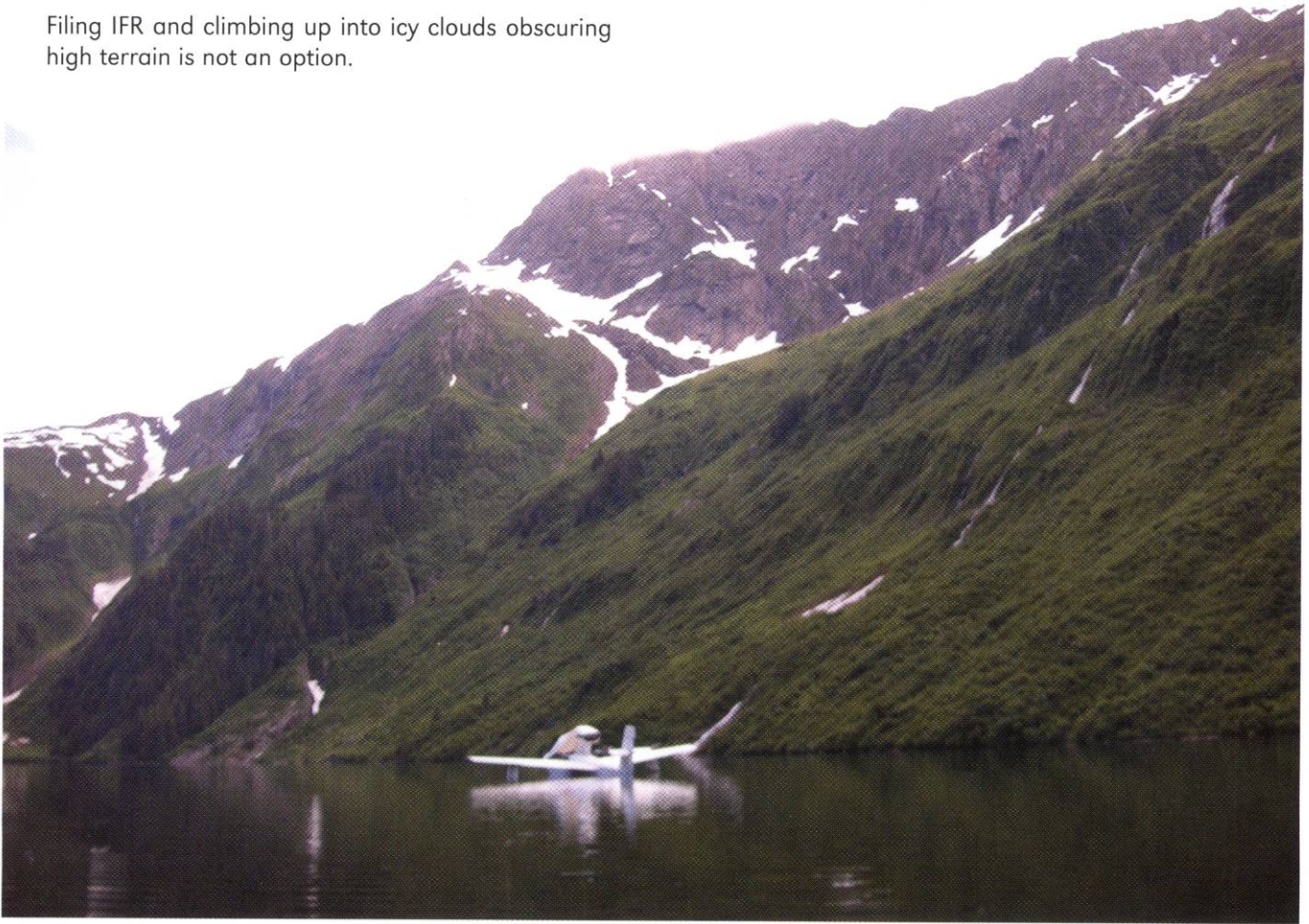
I've now made this trip 30 times. No matter how many times I do it, I think that I'm nothing more than a serious beginner. If anyone out there in the water flying community has done more of them, and I'm sure there are, please let me know. There's always something new to learn. ■

Richard Pellerin is an FAA medical examiner in Seattle. After winning a Green Beret at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in late 1968, he spent four months training with the Navy Seals in Key West, Florida. He then was posted to the Cambodian border, where he served as a camp medic for a year. He is an active climber, scuba diver, sky diver, sailor, and pilot. Visit his occupational web site at www.faamed.com, where he says, "Just remember, if you're not living on the edge, you're taking up too much space."



Usually, low visibility means calm water.

Filing IFR and climbing up into icy clouds obscuring high terrain is not an option.



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