

# Tackling the challenges of a wilderness flight



**Y**ou're pondering a trip to Alaska or some other remote destination, you've got your maps out, and your floating and flying steed is ready to go. You're new at this wilderness flying stuff, and you're sitting there thinking about all that might or might not go wrong on such a journey. I'll share my thoughts about the psychology of taking an airplane deep into the wilderness, which is to say the psychology of risk-taking.

I'll start by saying that the experts at risk-taking are all dead, so if you choose to read on about my musings do so knowing they are only those of an amateur, albeit a serious beginner. This philosophical offering is being composed while living aboard N999QQ, my Lake Buccaneer, alone at anchor in seven feet of water on a lake that appeared in some of the pictures that appeared with my previous *Water Flying* articles (see "Flying the Inside Passage," Jan/Feb and March/April 2007 issues, pages 24 and 40, respectively).

# *The Psychology of Risk-Taking*

Story and photos  
by Richard Pellerin





## STILL UNSCATHED

This has not been a good summer for general aviation in the panhandle of southeast Alaska. This season alone 16 people have died in three separate crashes. All were weather related. Having flown repeatedly in a lot of that same kind of weather, and this being my thirty-third time in Alaska, it would be nice to think that I am still unscathed as a result of experience and good judgment. However, an almost inaudible voice way back in the very rear-most part of my brain tells me there may be more to surviving than experience and judgment.

You may have heard the saying, "Before brains, good looks, wealth, and anything else desirable in life, first be the recipient of good luck." This contrasts with the saying, "In life you make your own luck." In terms of flying I should wish that the latter, not the former, were true but I am convinced that is not entirely so. Good and talented people, flying every day with good judgment, have become the aforementioned experts in risk-taking.

Any analysis of the psychology of risk-taking is complicated. When I get into tight situations in my plane, what can I best hope for? The tougher the

**The tougher the flying the more I hope that I have been in that same situation before and got through it, thereby giving me some confidence that I can do it again.**

flying the more I hope that I have been in that same situation recently and got through it, thereby giving me some confidence that I am current and can do it again. I tell everyone that I'm a better pilot in September on my way home from the last trip north than I am in May on the first one of the season going up.

This brings up an interesting point. Gerry Bruder, a near and dear friend of mine who writes frequently for *Water Flying*, is a veteran commercial floatplane pilot. He worries that the difficult flying I do is made all the more difficult by the fact that I don't do it everyday. I worry that he does it more often than I do. We both worry about each other. Indeed, I worry about the commercial bush pilots everywhere in the Pacific Northwest flying on and off the water. They are my real heroes.

I do more than 100 aviation medicals a month in Seattle. I hardly ever hear a scary story from an airline pilot, but hangar tales of how this, that, or the other waterborne pilot survived a harrowing experience abound. It would be my considered opinion that, having been involved in a shooting war myself, the only pilots more at risk than those in seaplanes flying into the wilderness are military pilots on actual combat missions.

## NUMBERS UP

But, as I mentioned, an analysis of the psychology of risk-taking is complicated. I well remember surviving some frightening episodes in Vietnam and the euphoria at having lived to see another day. But the euphoria always has to be counterbalanced by the realization that you can only be lucky so many times before your number comes up.

No one should take their plane into the deep wilderness without first asking themselves some probative questions. The first has to do with experience—not your total time, but the quality of your flight experience. Does it apply to the type of challenges you're liable to encounter out there where you're going to be pretty much on your own?

A retired airline pilot with 30,000 hours sporting a freshly issued single-engine-sea rating may not be the best candidate to conduct such a flight. Neither is anyone who has not found themselves in a flying situation that challenged them to some degree and from which they managed to extricate themselves.

The tragedy of John F. Kennedy, Jr. comes to mind. Here was a fellow with a lot of irons in the fire who could afford a high-performance plane and instructors to fly with him. I wonder how much opportunity he had to fly solo and learn to survive small doses of jeopardy.

That is how we mature as pilots. We start off with little problems, master them, and then proceed on to tackle and overcome larger challenges. And going off into the wilderness alone can present some very large challenges.

If you choose to conduct a flight into a remote area in less-than-perfect weather (on most days here in the Pacific Northwest that's going to be your only option) at least have the sense to do it with the odds stacked as much in your favor as is possible. I've gotten involved in some white-knuckle flying on about half the 33 trips I've made so far to Alaska. This year low ceilings and visibilities were there to contend with on all three trips.

Gerry Bruder once wrote in *Water Flying* that if you wouldn't conduct a flight without a GPS moving map display, you really need to ask yourself should you conduct one with it. I thought it was an apt observation, but neither of us would opine that you should go off into the wilderness without one.

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## THUNDER AND LIGHTNING

I did a long trip deep in the coastal range of British Columbia as a flight of two with a good buddy who was also flying a Lake. The weather was good at first but gradually deteriorated. After a two-and-a-half-hour flight we were within 15 minutes of our destination and flying through a mountain valley now beset with thunder and lightning.

My friend was more familiar with the area than me, and he was in the lead. He made it over a ridge that disappeared in the thunderheads by the time I got there. I turned back into the valley from whence we had come. I could hear him on the radio saying I had to get over that ridge since he could see the rest of the way to the airport on the other side.

I did a 360 and discovered I was trapped in this ever-tightening valley on a storm-tossed ride skirting the periphery of cumulo-granite. Visibility was now down to a half-mile in some quadrants, and I was three- or four-hundred feet off the deck. First things first: Fly the airplane.

I saw a narrow gravel road that at one point ran reasonably straight for a few hundred yards, and started making circuits around it. If I had to put 999QQ down on that, the plane would

have been badly damaged but I was confident I had at least a chance to walk away from it. Next I punched the Nearest button on my Garmin 195, and the 10 closest airports came up on the screen. They were all ahead, behind, or off to the coastal side of my plane, all in directions I could not go because of the weather.

I weighed my options. They did not seem good. The one thing I had going for me was plenty of fuel, but at that point it seemed as if the only thing plenty of fuel would have resulted in was a bigger fire when I crashed. So why not burn it down and see if over time the situation changed? I continued to orbit the road for several minutes, but nothing opened up. Then the sky began to lighten, but not in the direction of any of the nearest airports, civilization, and the safety I sought.

I expanded the scale of the GPS. Fifty miles away on a straight line were two large lakes. I had no idea of their names or even where they were except that they were in the general direction of the slightly lighter-colored sky. Heart in my mouth, I made a decision. Without being certain of exactly where I was, and flying in ceilings and visibilities that precluded any chance of taking my eyes off the windscreen long enough to fix

my position on the sectional, I pointed the nose off in the direction of the slightly lighter sky and deeper into the wilderness, leaving behind my ad hoc runway.

## I SURVIVED

What at the time seemed like a desperate gamble paid off. An hour later, after flying circuitously between the peaks and ever deeper into the wilderness but into improving weather, I arrived at that lake using the GPS moving map display. I had survived. While it's possible I could have done it without the GPS, clearly the feat was accomplished more easily with it. It gave my mind a coherent and legible plan to pull myself out of peril.

For the same reason I carry a tiny scuba tank (see "Water Flying Gear: Spare Air," Jan/Feb 2008 issue, page 12), a 406 MHz Epirb around my neck (see "Water Flying Gear: PLB to the Rescue," July/August 2007 issue, page 12) and a survival suit in the plane. There's also a tool box on board. It may not allow me to change out the crankshaft, but at least it gives me a chance to deal with a serious but potentially repairable mechanical emergency at a remote location. I've never had to use any of these things, but when things get tight I am more confident knowing they are available if needed. For the same reason I maintain the airplane to a high standard.

There are no guarantees for those of us who would choose to fly off into the deep wilderness. Having out-run and out-flown all but one storm in my time (I survived a forced landing in a mountainous forest when the engine lost power while conducting a search and rescue flight beneath an overcast, but that's a story for another time), my mindset is that, for those of us who must fight for it, life has a flavor the protected will never know. To touch the face of the deep wilderness and hide in its face is a unique privilege. It's all part of the psychology of risk-taking. ■

*Richard Pellerin is an FAA medical examiner in Seattle. He was a Green Beret, trained with the Navy Seals, and served as a camp medic during the Vietnam war. He is an active climber, scuba diver, sky diver, sailor, and pilot. Visit his occupational web site at [www.faamed.com](http://www.faamed.com), where he says, "Just remember, if you're not living on the edge, you're taking up too much space."*



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