

# Flying High

When two young men crash their model seaplane into the waters off Oyster Bay on Long Island Sound, they're in for a few surprises.

by Ken Pomerenk

**M**y favorite boating story dates back to when my brother and I were young, and it has as much to do with flying as boating.

Having grown up on the north shore of Long Island, my brother, Bill, and I were into both boating and remote-control airplanes. Harnessing the wind—with a set of wings or a well-trimmed mainsail—was our passion. If we weren't on the water, we were at the flying field. In early December 1979, when Bill was 22 and I was 18, we figured out how to pursue both our passions at the same time.

Bill had the brilliant idea to build a model seaplane. We planned to fly it at the beach near where we usually launched our boat in Oyster Bay, and, since it was almost winter, we figured we'd be of no bother to anyone. So a few days later, we fitted one of our old models with a brand new set of shiny silver floats and headed for the beach. The just-above-freezing cold and the stiff 20-knot offshore wind didn't deter us a bit. With no one but a few frigid seagulls watching, we quickly set up at water's edge. Both being good Eagle Scouts, we were bright enough to bring along our trusty dinghy in the unlikely event that we would have to do an "at sea" recovery. We were really good fliers, so what could go wrong?

We quickly fired up the small model engine, and I waded a few feet into the ice-cold water to set the plane down. Within a few seconds Bill had it off the water and dancing around the sky. He put the plane, which had a four-foot wingspan, through his usual repertoire of stunts and maneuvers, and we both mentally patted ourselves on the backs for being so clever. Just then the engine



unexpectedly died while the seaplane was flying inverted.

Actually, this wasn't that big a deal. We'd lost an engine before and were quite good at recovering and performing dead-stick landings. The only thing we didn't account for this time was the water. Bill quickly recovered his composure and did a great job of landing our precious little model just a few yards from water's edge. I was contemplating wading in to get her, but Bill instead jumped into our dinghy, shouting, "I flew her. I'll get her back." I wasn't going to argue. Bill began to row out, but at his first stroke, one of the oars snapped in half. Since both he and the seaplane were close to shore, he tossed the broken oar toward the beach and decided to paddle out. That decision turned out to be the mistake of the day.

Did I mention the offshore wind? The 20-knot one? Well before my brother was five feet from shore, the model was 10. Five paddles later my brother was 10 feet from the shore, and the seaplane was 20. You can see where this was going. Before

long my brother was in the middle of the bay with only a paddle, and he was quickly getting further from shore.

Just about then, our parents drove up to see how we were doing. My father was recovering from a recent, and fairly severe, heart attack. Thankfully he was doing quite well, but recovering from a heart attack meant keeping everything very low-key. My mother walked to the water's edge, where I was contemplating my options for recovering my brother—none—and she quickly grasped the severity of our situation. Bill was way, way out there and getting smaller, and there was absolutely no land between him and Long Island Sound.

She walked back to the car to get Dad's input but decided instead to tell him to take half a Valium—the drug of choice back then to keep heart patients from freaking out. He did, and then he alone joined me at the shoreline, where we again contemplated options—still none. Being worried for my Dad as much as my brother, I said, "Dad, you better

take one of those Valium thingies the doctor gave you.”

“Okay,” he said. “Good idea.”

Mom came back just in time to spy my brother, who had managed to recover the seaplane, trying in vain to paddle back to shore. At one point, he grabbed both his sides and bent over to the floor of the dinghy (later we found out that he was trying to keep his ungloved hands warm), and this worried our mom. She decided it was time to call in the big guns. She grabbed my father and drove to a nearby police booth to get help. On the way, she suggested that he take the other half of his Valium. “No problem,” he said, not wanting to further upset his wife.

The story gets a little foggy at this point. Apparently, Mom rushed into the tiny police station in Bayville and announced to the patrolman there, “My son’s seaplane has crashed into Oyster Bay, and he’s being blown out to sea.” When we talked about it later, she admitted that she may have left out the fact that it was a model seaplane, and that my brother was in a dinghy. The policeman quickly reacted, and within seconds he contacted the Nassau County police launch, which was on patrol on the other side of the bay.

Back at the beach, I was up to my knees in the water, as I somehow thought being four feet closer to my brother would help. I was very relieved to see the police launch come into view. I was ecstatic when I saw the launch, spray flying from her sides and moving at about 20 knots, come screaming up to Bill, who being very embarrassed, waved meekly in greeting. The police launch continued on its course and flew by Bill without even taking a second look.

My parents had returned and were standing next to me on the shore, taking it all in. Dad just chuckled. That Valium was doing its job very well. He was not the least bit worried and thought it was all a great adventure. I was less amused. Eventually the launch turned around and approached my brother, who was much more energetic with his waves.

What happened next still makes us all laugh. The policeman approached Bill and inquired, “Did you see a seaplane go down around here?” All my brother could do was point at the tiny model seaplane perched on the rear dingy seat. Anger, then a smile flashed over the officer’s face as he said to Bill, “Would you like to hand your vessel to me, sir?” The seaplane recovery was complete when the launch finally deposited seaplane, dinghy and brother back on shore.

As the launch sped off, Bill turned to Dad and said, “Hey, sorry to put you through that. You might want to take a Valium.”

“Are you kidding, son?” Dad replied, now with camera in hand. “I can’t wait to tell the guys at the office about your rescue.”

That was almost 25 years ago, and we still love telling the story. Dad recovered fully and was back at work a few weeks later armed with his photos of our experience. Bill and I were back flying the seaplane the next week (with a new oar this time) and we continued flying models until college and girlfriends took over our free time. Still, airplanes and boating remain integral parts of our lives. I became an aerospace engineer, Bill an electrical engineer, and we both work on air traffic control systems at airports all around the country. When we’re not at work, you can find us on one of our boats, and whenever we see the police launch, we can’t help but look back fondly at what we now call the “Great Seaplane Incident.”



*Ken Pomerenk lives with his wife, Terry, and daughter, Kimberly, in Kings Park, New York, a block away from the Nissequogue River,*

*where they moor their 25-foot MacGregor sailboat. When not at work, you can find him either sailing with Bill or water-skiing with his mom and dad in the family’s 19-foot Galaxy runabout in Oyster Bay, New York.*

*Sea Ray*  
The Standard of Excellence™

**Bassett Boat Co**  
1 Masthead Drive  
Warwick, RI 02886  
Phone: 401-886-7899  
www.bassettboat.com

**Bassett Boat Co**  
627 Boston Post Road  
Westbrook, CT 06498  
Phone: 860-399-5581  
www.bassettboat.com

**Dedham Sportsmen’s Center**  
940 Providence Highway  
Dedham, MA 02026  
Phone: 781-326-8844  
www.dedhamsearay.com

**Hyannis Marina**  
1 Willow St  
Hyannis, MA 02601  
Phone: 508-790-4000  
www.hyannismarina.com

**Surfside 3 Marina**  
846 S. Wellwood Ave.  
Lindenhurst, NY 11757  
Phone: 631-957-5900  
www.surfside3.com

**Surfside 3 Chelsea Piers Manhattan**  
23rd St. and the Hudson River  
New York, NY 10011  
Phone: 212-336-7873  
www.surfside3.com

**Surfside 3 of CT**  
144 Water Street  
Norwalk, CT 06854  
Phone: 203-831-6311  
www.surfside3.com