

# **Seaplane Operations from an Operation Manager's Point of View**

## **My Background**

I have worked in the general aviation industry in Scotland for 10 years until recently. Mainly in flight operations, though I have also worked in maintenance and flight training.

Until lately I was employed by Loch Lomond Seaplanes in Scotland, the only commercial operator of seaplanes in the UK and Ireland, holding the post of Operations Manager. I am now employed as an Operations Manager for Jet-Ops in Dubai who provide flight operations for Seawings.

I was the first local person to be trained as a line pilot at Loch Lomond Seaplanes. I received all my seaplane training in Scotland, and to date have never operated a seaplane outside of the UK, which I think is a first for any commercial seaplane operation in the UK. There have been a few operators of seaplanes in Scotland, each with varying degrees of success but all short lived.

## **Pilots**

Traditionally all our company pilots in Scotland were foreign and required work visas and licence validations; an expensive and time consuming process that would typically take up to 3 months from hiring a pilot to them being able to fly commercially. Based on the seasonal nature of seaplane operations, this is very expensive for an operator to have pilots on the payroll but not flying.

Regulators will issue validations based on foreign licences with a view to the person gaining a JAR licence within one year but this is impractical as a timescale, as it would take at least 10 weeks of full-time attendance for flight tests and written exams not to mention all the self-study and a cost of over 10,000 Euros. There is very little credit given for previous flying experience in the JAR system, even if you have 5,000 hours and

10 years of operating seaplanes else where all pilots are treated the same as beginners!

With seaplanes still being a ‘national issue’ they fall under the regulator of the country and not under JAR/EASA. In the UK all commercial seaplane pilots are required to sit a Professional Seamanship exam that is administered in London. This exam takes place only once a month and this creates further problems in hiring pilots, as until they pass this exam (results can take 2 weeks to be issued), they cannot have a seaplane class rating issued on their commercial licence and therefore cannot undergo line training.

Many seaplanes in Europe are amphibious given the lack of seaplane bases for maintenance and refueling. In the UK there is no amphibious rating and the regulator had difficulty acknowledging that any rating had to be issued for both land and sea use e.g. C208 SET (Land and Sea) as operations required the use of both water and normal runways.

Standard licensing forms provided by regulators do not cater for seaplane operations e.g. Skill test forms that only cover land plane items. This added to a lot of confusion for regulators and operators.

Then of course there is the issue of the lack of qualified examiners for seaplanes in Europe. Even the few examiners that are available mostly have no commercial experience of seaplane operations. Using an examiner from another JAR/EASA state is not simple either as the operator requires prior permission from their regulator before using an examiner from another member country.

### Aircraft

Many operators use aircraft types only because they are the only ones certified in Europe and not because they are the best aircraft for the job. In the UK, aircraft like the DeHavilland Beaver and Otter are not approved for commercial use but in other member states they are accepted under Annex 2- hardly a level playing field!

## Maintenance

The largest manufacturer of aircraft floats require 25 and 50 hourly checks on their floats, very simple checks that involve inspection and lubrication. All other checks on the floats are 100 hourly and can be combined with base maintenance.

Before I took up my post with Loch Lomond Seaplanes the operator had to return the aircraft to its maintenance base every 25 hours; sometimes twice a week in peak season, to have these checks performed. For an operator of two seaplanes it is not cost-effective to employ an engineer at their operating base.

I negotiated with the regulator to have flight crew authorised to carry out these checks along with compressor rinsing on turbine aircraft for salt-water operations. As a result of these maintenance authorisations, we managed to cut down on maintenance expense and the cost of positioning the aircraft.

## Approval of landing sites

Some regulators in Europe are happy to issue exemptions to allow landing at unlicensed water aerodromes whilst others insist on full approval of a water aerodrome.

There are far more helicopters in Europe than seaplanes, and many land at off airport sites carrying just as many passengers as a seaplane can, though when it comes to seaplanes there seems to be an insistence that movements only take place to and from licensed water aerodromes. This defeats the purpose of the flexibility of utilizing seaplanes.

Even when operators try and comply with regulators and set up licensed water aerodromes, the goalposts are far from clear, and often the requirements are far from practical or cost effective. So far I have heard of insistence of windsocks floating in the water to buoys marking landing areas which of course create more hazards to both seaplanes and other watercraft!

## Fuel

There are a lot of mis-perceptions about seaplanes and the environment despite many studies proving low environmental impact compared to other water users.

Authorities seem to accept that other watercraft can undergo refueling on the water but when it comes to aircraft they are not so keen. In order to utilise payload you have to be able to re-fuel on the water at as many destinations as possible. Logistically it's a problem transporting and storing fuel to at remote locations and legal/cost-effective methods of doing this only allow for the movement of small quantities at a time.

## The Future

I look forward to Fusetra making recommendations to the EC to overcome the issues I have highlighted and hope as a result to see many seaplane operations thriving in Europe in the future.