



N323 at the dock. (All photos from the author's collection)

Out-of-Balance Mishap

Avalon Bay, Catalina Island - May 24, 1966

by David Johnston

Catalina Air Lines (CAL) Grumman Goose N323 was departing from Avalon Bay (AVX) on Catalina Island, Calif., for Long Beach Airport (LBG) with a full load on a clear day with calm winds and sea. This ship was one of two in our fleet that had been modified to carry 11 passengers. "Clear right!" I announced to the pilot, which was followed by the starboard engine coming to life with its usual whining sound and a puff of smoke. Next, the port engine did the same. The fuselage tie-down lines were released and the ship moved a short distance away to takeoff position.

As the ship taxied away I jogged up the floating ramp and entered our office at the top of the pier to retrieve the rest of the lemonade I had left there. Standing behind the front counter I heard the normal sound of two Goose engines at full takeoff horsepower change to a distressing wail! I looked up and I saw the entire topside of N323 with her bow aimed straight to the sky! Instantly, the sounds of both engines quit, the ship lurched to the left, and fell hard and flat onto the calm sea. The silence

was - as they say - deafening. I leaped over the front counter - leaving the "NOTICE" sign swinging in my wake as I sprinted down the ramp and jumped into the "Woody" boat.

En route to the now motionless Goose - I saw that the port float strut was bent inward and was just barely supporting the port wing. Arriving at the passenger door with the "Woody" boat I began helping passengers into the boat. Fortunately, no one appeared to be injured but they certainly looked distressed. After two quick trips between the bent Goose and our floats - all passengers plus the pilot were safely escorted up to our office on the Pleasure Pier. In the meantime, I had returned to the adrift Goose, tied the "Woody" boat to the port side and maneuvered it temporarily to one of our CAL moorings in the bay.

Meanwhile in the office, the station manager worked at making the necessary calls to Long Beach, arranging for a replacement Goose and pilot - plus other duties required following an aircraft incident. (i.e., issue a current weather

American Aviation Historical Society Journal, Summer 2022



AAT/CAL office at the water end of the Pleasure Pier.

conditions report on the teletype, and make notes for later writing of the FAA report, etc.). With immediate tasks attended to - a flurry of inquiries soon popped up from: the Avalon Fire Department, Los Angeles County Sheriff, Mayor of Avalon, the Catalina Islander newspaper and many, many residents of the surrounding hills all clamoring for attention in person and/or by telephone. What had been a calm, quiet day in the bay turned out to be a very exciting splash down - in front of God and thousands of spectators in and around Avalon Bay.

Post Incident Actions

The airline owner immediately issued orders to us over the phone - saying NOT to talk with anyone about what had occurred - just refer them to him. He then told the pilot to taxi the ship (using the starboard engine only) from our mooring in the bay down the coast to the Pebbly Beach seaplane ramp and park it up out of the way where it could be worked on and readied for ferrying to LGB for more complete inspections and repairs.

Soon, two replacement Gooses arrived in AVX and we loaded the passengers and still shaken pilot onto these ships that departed for LGB without further incident. The rest of the

day for us in Avalon was a flurry of incoming phone calls plus a blur of dealing with public relations and answering questions. The most popular of which (for the locals in this small town) was - "Who was the pilot?"

One Day Later

Our large 4-engine Sikorsky VS-44 (881) was not yet on the regular schedule - but it was ready for the summer season and she was the only ship we had with a cargo door large enough to accept the Goose engine mount needed right away in AVX. So, the chief pilot put 881 in the air and radioed our station he was 10 minutes out and wanted a boat to meet him near Pebbly Beach to offload a new engine mount and two mechanics. I loaded our portable transceiver radio into the "Woody" boat and headed out to meet 881 near Pebbly. It was not too windy this day but the sea was pretty lumpy - maybe 3-4 foot swells with light chop. In conditions such as these - the sea is smoother along Pebbly Beach road because the swells run parallel to the coast and the kelp beds there help knock down the swells/chop a bit. I radioed the pilot that I was in position.

He landed and came off the step right near the "Woody" boat, and as he shut down the engines I motored up near the



The Woody boat at our docks with 881 at right.

cockpit. He yelled down for me to go to the passenger door and pick up the two mechanics and their tool boxes. I circled around to the passenger door where both mechanics were looking at the conditions with alarm. Neither mechanic was used to transferring themselves and their gear from a big plane to a small boat in rough water. They each had a heavy tool box, an overnight bag, and a lunch box. During this transfer the “Woody” had shipped a good amount of water as we bounced around.

With all aboard, I began to cautiously move “Woody” around the outside of the port wing (too rough to go underneath) and I asked the mechanics to use the cups from their Thermos’ bottles to start bailing. With wide eyes - they did - as we headed for the bow compartment door to get the engine mount. It took a few tries against the swell and chop to get near the bow where another helper was holding the engine mount outside the door. The impatient pilot then stuck his head out the cockpit window and yelled down “can’t you get that thing any closer?” I said, “I will in just a minute.” - and as “Woody” fought through the swells - I did it with a soggy thud off the hull of 881. (To my credit - I did not say “Is that close enough”)...

We secured the engine mount in “Woody” along with everything else and returned to our docks. Back at the pier

I unloaded the guys and their gear and they checked into the Pavilion Lodge hotel to spend the night. The next morning I took them to Pebbly (this time using our CAL van) where they swapped out the bent mount for the new one - remounted the engine and waited for a spare pilot to get to Avalon in order to fly the entire package back to LGB. The bent mount was saved for a later trip back to the mainland when 881 returned to the schedule.

The FAA

Following the FAA crash investigation, we were given instructions aimed at avoiding a repeat. The report cited the cause was an out of balance loading of the aircraft. The remedy was an FAA edict that every flight (the Sikorsky too!) had to have a pre-departure weight and balance calculation sheet that was to be personally signed by the pilot in command. That meant that we needed to record the correct pre-flight weight of all passengers, plus every piece of baggage and freight being added to the aircraft. So, we bought a scale, placed it at the top of the pier, weighed everything and listed the it on the new Weight and Balance sheets. For passengers - we guessed at the weight to avoid any embarrassment. Just between us - the joke was that we were getting training for a new job at a carnival. ➔