

HANGAR FLYING

Carrier landings on Lake Tahoe

By Ray Shady

In 1985 I had a boat rental business on the north end of Lake Tahoe. Jay Kimball came to town with a balloon and a pontoon boat. He advertised for a Coast Guard certified boat driver. I showed up, drove his boat for a week, and then was taken for a ride in his balloon. That did it. I decided to learn to fly balloons. But after a short time, Jay was off to other adventures, and I was left with a used balloon I did not yet know how to fly. A local pilot, Bill Schilling, taught me. We launched some distance back from the shore, flew over pine trees, the beach, and then out over the water, using the invariable down slope morning winds. Before long boaters came over to see what was going on. I charged them \$20 for 10 minutes for everyone in the boat. We simply left their boat drifting. After 10 minutes another boat would come over, and want a ride. We landed on our pontoon boat, exchanged passengers, and left their boat adrift. While we were flying this second group, our boat took the original passengers back to their boat!

Eventually, we took passengers out on our 25-foot long pontoon boat, and exchange passengers every half hour for perhaps two hours. We climbed and descended over the lake. We would often touch down for fun on the water, and then climb to see if there was a box that would take us back to shore. If not, then we slowly drove the boat, with the basket on deck and the balloon still inflated, to shore. We would walk the basket off, and deflate in the parking lot.

Landing on a boat was easy. We simply held the basket five feet above the surface, and the boat maneuvered underneath. One crew member simply put



Today at the south end of Lake Tahoe, the only certified balloon carrier in the world can launch and recover a 240,000 cu.ft. balloon. It is operated by Harley Hoy.

weight on, and the basket settled on the flat deck of the pontoon boat.

The tricky part of lake flying was knowing just where the surface was. If there was wind, the ripples made it easy. But when it was glassy, the water was so clear that you could often see rocks on the bottom of the lake and you had no idea where the surface was. We used the shoreline as a guide to the surface, and let ourselves down easy. The pilot should not look down, but toward the shore to gauge the elevation above the surface. Sometimes visiting pilots wanted to try lake flying and boat landings. We let them land on our boat, and they enjoyed the novelty. We enjoyed watching them misjudge the surface as they would sink three feet into the water!

From the pilot's point of view, this type of flying is pretty boring, just up and down over the lake. So we would take off a half mile inland. It was more fun to at least have some time over land before heading out over the lake.

After a few years, I decided to sell my boat rental business. Without a dock for my boat, it was no longer practical to fly over the water. Also Lake Tahoe was expe-

riencing drought conditions; the surface was lower, which meant that we would have had to wade the balloon ashore for 100 yards. So I moved to Truckee near Donner Pass about 15 miles away, and no longer flew over Lake Tahoe.

When I started, people used to tell me that flying over the lake and landing on it simply could not be done. I did not know that. I thought everybody went out and landed on boats, so I just went out there and did it. I tried to keep it simple, and it worked for me. ♡

Hangar Flying is edited by George Denniston, a doctor and balloonist in Seattle, Washington. If you have an experience to share with others, email your manuscript to George Denniston, Hangar Flying, gcd@u.washington.edu. Balloon Life pays \$35 for each story used.
