



Rescuing the Sandbar Mitchell

BY JEFF SKILES, VICE PRESIDENT OF COMMUNITIES AND MEMBER PROGRAMS

EAA MEMBERS AND CHAPTERS have always shared The Spirit of Aviation by designing, building, and restoring, but occasionally one of our members takes on a particularly daunting project that stands out from the crowd. Patrick Mihalek, EAA 529904, and Todd Trainor, EAA 13759, from Chapter 384 in Brighton, Michigan, will recover a B-25J Mitchell bomber from a remote location in Alaska and bring it back to life.

The B-25 served its country from late in World War II until 1959 before it was sold and continued on as a fire bomber. In June 1969, while fighting the Manley Hot Springs fires that would consume more than 2 million acres in Alaska, the bomber suffered a double engine failure shortly after takeoff from Fairbanks, possibly due to fuel contamination. With few options available, the pilot, Herm Gallaher, skillfully landed wheels-up on a sandbar in the Tanana River. While Herm walked away from the accident scene, the aircraft was considered a total loss.

The wrecked aircraft was salvaged to remove the engines, propellers, wheels, and other items of value, but the remainder

was abandoned in the Alaskan wilderness. For 44 years, the airframe has been waiting for rescue.

This summer, Patrick, a former Young Eagle, Air Academy camper, Aviation Explorer, and longtime EAAer, and Todd, a Vintage Aircraft Association member and founding director of the Aeronca Aircraft History Museum, will lead a team to recover what's left of the airframe and bring it back to Michigan for restoration.

Patrick and Todd's lives have been immersed in aviation. After graduating from Western Michigan University's College of Aviation with an A&P certification, Patrick started Legend of Aces Aviation with dreams of restoring and maintaining warbirds. For the past

five years, he's done just that. "I have worked my way up from nothing," Patrick said. "I now travel frequently to maintain warbirds around the country, and in my shop I am restoring three 1940 NA-64 Yale trainers for customers."

For years, Patrick has dreamed about restoring a B-25 Mitchell and building a warbird museum around it, but he said he thought it would never happen—until now. "I have found a B-25J Mitchell bomber that can be recovered from Alaska and restored to flying condition using parts that I have collected over the past few years."

Patrick and Todd will lead a team to Fairbanks to mount a recovery operation. The team will travel by airboat to the sandbar and disassemble as much of the remaining airframe as possible. The remaining center section will weigh approximately 2,000 pounds. The team will either airlift it out, or place it on skids and wait for winter to drag it down the frozen Tanana River with snowmobiles. From there, it will be loaded on a truck for the trip back to Michigan.

After decades of vandalism, the Mitchell is far from complete, but Patrick and Todd have already purchased parts on eBay and from elsewhere that will complete the airframe.

"It is my goal to rescue her from further pillage, restore her to her former glory, and allow her to proudly fly the skies over America," Patrick said. Once rescued, the B-25 will be the pride of the Warbirds of Glory Museum, directed by Patrick. You can follow the progress of the recovery project and restoration at www.SandbarMitchell.org.



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