

Alaska Dispatch

News and voices from the Last Frontier

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The Sandbar Mitchell has left the river.

After years of preparation and pre-planning and with \$20,000 raised from a successful Kickstarter campaign, volunteers from the Warbirds of Glory Museum in Michigan returned to the Tanana River near Fairbanks, Alaska, earlier this summer and successfully recovered the old warbird's wreckage.

A team of 15 people, including two Alaskans, freed the B-25 from the river silt where it has rested since a total engine failure forced its landing on a sandbar in 1969. The aircraft was under a firefighting contract at the time and had been retrofitted with a tank to haul flame retardant. The original owners recovered the props, engines and other salvageable equipment soon after the crash -- the pilot was unharmed -- and then abandoned the rest. Museum staff tracked down the owner's descendants, purchased the plane and crafted a plan to get it out of Alaska.

The plan, according to Patrick Mihalek, Director of the Warbirds of Glory Museum, is to have the aircraft out of storage and in place on their hangar floor "before the snow flies." Right now staff and volunteers are at work cataloguing exactly what they were able to recover, including a number of castings and hydraulics. Those and miscellaneous parts recovered from the wreckage or other old B-25s will eventually find a home in the restored Sandbar Mitchell.

Over their four days on the Tanana, the volunteers removed everything they could get, even digging in the silt by hand to recover smaller parts Mihalek had not anticipated.

Two-ton bottle jacks were used to physically lift the B-25 about 1-1/2 feet off the ground and out of the silt, giving them access to it from all angles.

"We had a plan and really prepared," said Mihalek. "It took four and a half days and then we had it hauled out and were done."

The team's Alaskan volunteers made sure Mihalek and company were prepared to deal with the "tens of thousands of mosquitoes," he said, adding, "we used a lot of Deet. A LOT of Deet."

While the Sandbar Mitchell is now no longer physically in Alaska, its history in the state will remain with the aircraft and its final nose art will reflect the name it acquired after its landing. The team also left a memorial in place, an engraved plaque welded to a pipe and piece of the retardant tank. They also formed the aircraft with two-by-fours so those who fly over can still see where the B-25 rested.

The full restoration to airworthy status should take about 10 years.