



Drawing on a Passion for B-25s

Patrick Mihalek's *Sandbar Mitchell*

July 30, 2013 - Patrick Mihalek has been drawing pictures of North American B-25s since he was 8, before he even knew what they were.

"My friends say aviation is in my genes," he says, laughing.

After taking three or four Young Eagles flights and being a four-time camper at the EAA Air Academy, Mihalek dreamed of starting his own aviation museum, highlighted by a B-25J Mitchell bomber.

"I always liked the history part of aviation," he explains. "It just fascinates me, and the B-25 is such a beautiful airplane...."

Mihalek, now 30, is one big step closer to that dream. On July 14, he brought home the airframe of the B-25 *Sandbar Mitchell* after recovering it from Alaska where in June 1969 it crash-landed on a sandbar in the Tanana River three miles outside Fairbanks.

The firefighting pilot lost both engines on climb-out. He was able to jettison the load of retardant, and photos taken at the time depict a fairly intact B-25J at rest on the bar.

The U.S. Air Force originally flew the plane from 1944 to 1959. Its final USAF service was as a TB-25J trainer, serving at Vance AFB, Oklahoma, and in Texas, Mihalek has learned.

In the 1960s it became a fire-suppression bomber, Tanker No. 8, in Alaska.

Mihalek says he learned of the B-25 as a college student. "Instead of going out to the bars, I'd sit home and go through CAP records for airplane wrecks. That's how I stumbled across it."

Recovering it wasn't easy, especially on a "Ramen noodles budget," Mihalek says. Throughout the decades, the island had become tree-covered, and the only way to get there was by a helicopter or airboat. While the weather meant the plane stayed in decent shape, vandals weren't quite as kind to the plane; they shot holes in it or took "souvenirs" with them, including cutting off her outer wings, forward and aft sections.

But after a final inspection in April 2013 showed the plane was worth salvaging, Mihalek and his crew of 14 volunteers arrived in Alaska on June 25, complete with the permits needed to retrieve the relic, piece by piece.

The first few days were spent clearing out a path to the warbird and building stands that would allow them to lift it out of the sand. They also dug it out of the sandbar and disassembled the plane until only the 2,000-pound center remained. The thought was to build a wooden skid and then slide it out once the river was frozen in January.

But thanks to publicity from the rescue, a construction firm donated the use of their helicopter, which lifted up the aircraft and took it back to their work area. The story of the rescue will be featured on a new TV show called *The Restorers*, Mihalek says; they will be episode two.

Mihalek estimates the restoration will take 10 years and \$750,000 to complete. "I've found two other B-25s that have also been abandoned, so we'll be going after those as well. That would permit us to use those parts on the *Sandbar Mitchell*."

It's his hope that *Sandbar Mitchell* can be renovated to flying shape with as many original parts as possible.

"It's taking some resourcefulness to get parts," he says, noting that he found a nose section on eBay.

He already has a complete Bendix top turret and plans to revert the *Sandbar Mitchell* back to its World War II bomber configuration. With characteristic cleverness, Mihalek has already picked out the markings he will apply to the finished restoration. In homage to this B-25's civilian career as an air tanker known by the alphanumeric designator 8Z, Mihalek says he plans to invoke the identifiers used by the 340th Bomb Group to keep 8Z on the tail, coupled with the newer nickname of Sandbar Mitchell.



Patrick Mihalek shows off a plaque they are selling to help fund the B-25 *Sandbar Mitchell* restoration project. (photo by Frederick A. Johnsen)

Mihalek works during the day at Legends of Aces Aviation, a Brighton, Michigan, restoration company that specializes in vintage, classic, and World War II aircraft. He founded the company after graduating in 2007 with a bachelor's degree in aviation maintenance technology and a certificate in computer aided design from Western Michigan University's College of Aviation.

Then, at night, he and about five to seven volunteers work on restoring Sandbar Mitchell. They are doing the restoration in parts and are hoping that someone will help fund the restoration.

His credentials for rebuilding a B-25 include previous restorations of a PT-22 and ongoing work on four North American NA-64 Yale trainers. "I've always liked North American products," he explains.

He plans to store the plane in his newly formed museum, Warbirds of Glory Museum in Brighton.

"Being 30 is an advantage," he says. "No one else my age is trying to do this ... and I know I can do this because of my determination and passion."

If you'd like to learn more about the B-25 restoration project or buy a special B-25 T-shirt, you can find Patrick Mihalek at night in Camp Scholler. His campsite is located at the intersection of Stits and Cottonwood streets. For more information, go to www.SandbarMitchell.org.