

Bomber taken to Livingston County for restoration (with photo gallery and video)

Written by Jim Totten Daily Press & Argus

Jul. 17, 2013 |



Patrick Mihalek, center, and two members of a recovery team look inside a Mitchell B-25 that crash-landed in Alaska in 1969. The team recovered the plane and brought it to Livingston County, where it will be restored.
/ Submitted photo

Crash-landed in Alaska, scavenged for parts, abandoned for 44 years and overgrown with trees, the B-25 Mitchell bomber would have been forgotten.

Brighton Township residents Patrick Mihalek and Todd Trainor made sure that didn't happen to the World War II-era plane.

They rescued it and brought it to Livingston County.

With a team of 12 volunteers, the two men flew to the Alaskan wilderness in June and took apart the plane. A helicopter airlifted the 2,000-pound midsection, and a flat-bottom hauling boat took the rest by river.

"Everything was a great success," Mihalek said. "In four days, we had pretty much the whole aircraft disassembled."

A truck driver then transported the plane and pieces 3,700 miles from Alaska to Michigan. Everything arrived Monday morning.

Volunteers and a team from Keller Well Drilling moved all the pieces into a hangar at Brighton Airport off Hyne Road in Brighton Township.

Mihalek and Trainor plan to restore the plane and make it the centerpiece of the Warbirds of Glory Museum. The museum will showcase World War II aircraft and allow Mihalek to share his passion for planes.

Mihalek said having great people help with the recovery was his favorite part.

"This was a dream of mine, and I couldn't have done it without them," he said.

Fairbanks residents loaned them tools, trucks, forklifts and generators.

Trainor said the people of Fairbanks “came out of the woodwork to help us.”

The recovery team brought guns for a possible encounter with bears or moose, but they saw neither. Instead, they met thousands of mosquitoes.

Trainor said the most amazing part was watching a helicopter lift the midsection.

“It was a tornado,” he said of the wind gusts from the helicopter. “It was fast. You get it hooked up, and it was gone.”

To get it hooked up and airlifted from the site took two minutes.

Mihalek and Trainor looked sunburned and exhausted Monday. It was a long trip, and the two airplane enthusiasts slept little because there was 24 hours of daylight in Alaska.

“There were nights that me and Todd were working until 2 a.m. and it looked like it was probably 6 or 7 o’clock our time,” Mihalek said.

Doris Mihalek said airplanes are her son’s first and only passion. He grew up in a house next to Brighton Airport.

“From the time Pat was born, that’s all that was in his brain,” she said. He drew and thought about planes all the time.

Sandbar Mitchell

Trainor said there were no injuries when the plane crash in 1969. However, the recovery team dedicated a monument to honor the aircraft and pilot.

A pilot flying the plane to fight a forest fire landed it on a sandbar along a remote stretch of river in Alaska after both engines failed.

Its propellers and engines were removed, and the plane, nicknamed the Sandbar Mitchell, was abandoned.

“It was cool,” Minnesota truck driver Evan Gray said of transporting the plane across Canada and the United States.

“There were a lot of questions and weird looks,” he said from motorists.

The recovery might be done, but Mihalek said he still needs funds for the restoration.

To learn more or to donate, visit <http://www.sandbarmitchell.org>.