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## MYSTERY OF THE SAND BAR MITCHELL



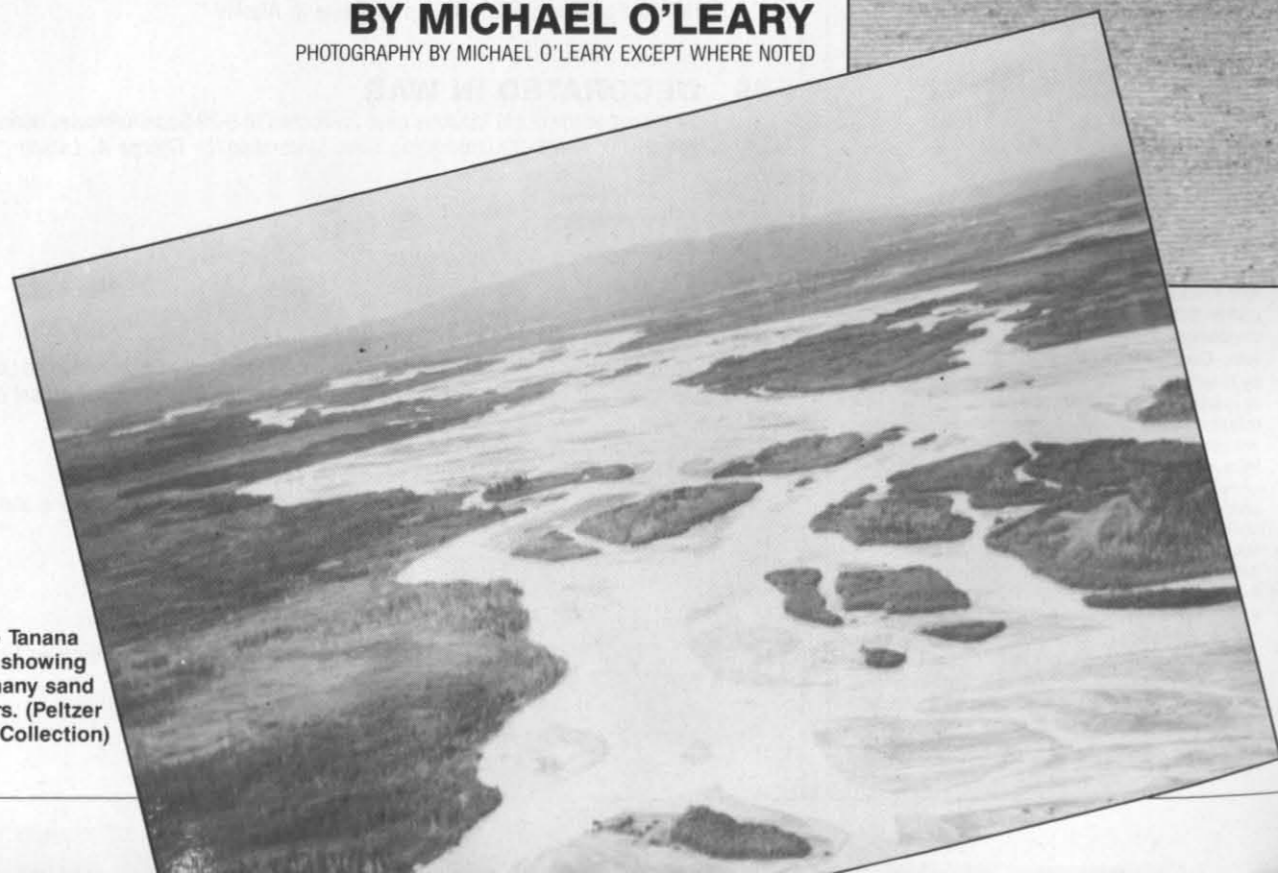
# MYSTERY OF THE SAND BAR MITCHELL

*We visit the crash site of a North American B-25 Mitchell and delve into the aircraft's history*

**BY MICHAEL O'LEARY**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL O'LEARY EXCEPT WHERE NOTED

TB-25N Mitchell N9088Z on the ramp at Anchorage International on 1 June 1969. Note the unusual use of 8Z as the tanker number. (Norm Taylor via Milo Peltzer)



The Tanana River, showing the many sand bars. (Peltzer Collection)

One of the worst fears of any pilot flying a surplus military aircraft is the loss of power shortly after takeoff.

That's exactly what happened to Herm Gallaher on 27 June 1969, shortly after taking off from Fairbanks International Airport in Alaska. Herm was flying a North American TB-25N Mitchell, registered N9088Z, that was owned by Ed Thorrudd of Missoula, Montana, and was on lease to the Bureau of Land Management. Heavily laden with a load of fire retardant, the Mitchell was gaining altitude after takeoff when both Wright

R-2600 radials began to lose power. The Mitchell was headed for the huge Manley Hot Springs fire that would burn over two million acres.

Herm Gallaher joined the Washington National Guard in 1941 and served with the 161st Infantry. Following America's entry into the Second World War, Herm transferred to the Army Air Force in January 1942 and became a crew chief on Boeing B-17s and Consolidated B-24s. After the end of the war, Gallaher returned to his native Washington and was the first person in the northwest to receive pilot training on the GI Bill, obtaining his pri-

vate, commercial and instructor ratings. In 1948, he formed Okanogan Skyways and dealt with aircraft sales, service, flight instruction, and agricultural spraying. He also started flying for the US Forest Service in 1950, flying firefighting cargo. He moved to Wenatchee in 1958 and established Gallaher Aviation at Pangborn Airport where he had charter, ambulance, and instruction services, as well as a Cessna dealership. In 1961 he obtained his instrument rating and instrument instructor's rating.

Also in 1961, Gallaher began flying copilot aboard B-25 N7946C, owned by

Wenairco, on fire bombing missions. He was type rated in the same B-25 during March 1962. His next assignment in tanker flying did not occur until the spring of 1966 when he was checked out in Cal-Nat Airways' Grumman F7F-3 Tigercat N7629C E41 and PBY-5A Super Catalina N609FF E40. The Super Catalina was fitted with R-2600 engines and an enlarged vertical tail, and was the first of its type in the US. Gallaher began flying both aircraft from Grass Valley, California, on fires around California.

In 1969, he began flying B-25s out of Fairbanks for Aero Retardant Co. in N8196H, tanker 5. He also flew for Colco Co. in their three B-25s, and was flying as relief pilot for Ed Thorrudd when the accident occurred in N9088Z, USAAF s/n 44-30733.

During the 1970 fire season, Herm again flew B-25s out of Fairbanks for Aero Retardant. In 1971, he began flying Super PBY-6A N2886D E49 for Sis-Q Flying



Jet Ranger pilot Jim Acher, Milo Peltzer, and the editor prepare for the flight to the wreck. (John Gallaher)



High-angle view showing the Mitchell shortly after the accident. The crash site is about five miles southeast of Ft. Wainwright. (Peltzer Collection)



Service. In 1972, Gallaher went to work for Hawkins & Powers in Greybull, Wyoming. At H&P, Herm flew all the company's Consolidated PB4Y Privateers and checked out in Fairchild C-119s in 1977, and flew the "Box" and PB4Y until his retirement from air tanker flying in 1982. After an extended illness, Herm Gallaher passed away in 1986.

While visiting Fairbanks this summer, I first heard of the "sand bar Mitchell" from BLM aviation manager Jim Ward. The aircraft wreck was not far from Ft. Wainwright, where the



Herm Gallaher in the cockpit of Mitchell N7946C. (Peltzer Collection)

John Gallaher in the cockpit of the Mitchell that his father flew. (Milo Peltzer)

BLM and Alaska Fire Service maintain a large operation. At Ft. Wainwright, I met John Gallaher — Herm's son and captain of a Hawkins & Powers Privateer. John, of course, knew of his father's accident in the Mitchell but had never seen the aircraft. The sand bar that was barren in 1969 was now a forest — the constantly changing Tanana River creates many of these sand bars and they are quickly overgrown



The wreckage of the Mitchell. Note how most of the right wing was torn off. (Peltzer Collection)



John Gallaher flies tanker 123 over the Mitchell (arrow). (Milo Peltzer)

Heavy wrinkling behind the cockpit shows considerable damage to the airframe. Some parts were salvaged after the crash.

with dense shrubs and trees.

Jim Ward kindly arranged for a helicopter flight to take John, myself, and air tanker historian Milo Peltzer from Ft. Wainwright to the crash site — just a matter of a few minutes. We flew over several sand bars looking for the Mitchell before finally spotting the wreckage — which was virtually invisible except from directly above.

The Jet Ranger landed on a small meadow and we hacked our way through the brush, encountering waves of Alaska's infamous mosquitoes until we got to the wreckage. The years have not been kind to the Mitchell — bits and pieces have disappeared, some parts were apparently salvaged shortly after the accident but others have been hacked off by souvenir hunters or by people who apparently wanted to utilize the aluminum. For example, the entire top of the rear fuselage was carefully cut off — probably to make some form of hut.

John carefully examined the wreck and



managed to obtain a few items from the Mitchell, as mementos. His father had told him about the accident on numerous occasions. Why had the Mitchell come to rest on the sand bar? The failure of both powerplants is still a bit of a mystery since the FAA accident report is rather vague — listing the probable cause as “powerplant

failure for undetermined reasons.” However, the most likely cause is that the Mitchell was apparently fueled with something other than avgas at Fairbanks before taking off on its final flight.

On the next day, John flew his Privateer over the sand bar and dipped his wings in a salute to his father. **WI**