

Rescuing a WWII bomber in Alaska

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Todd Trainor, left and Patrick Mihalek squeeze into the bombardier's compartment in the nose of the WWII era B-25 Mitchell Bomber they are restoring in a hangar at the Brighton Airport. The forward and tail sections in possession will be joined to the center section of another B-25 that currently lies on a sandbar near Fairbanks, Alaska. The men are organizing an expedition to recover the Sandbar Mitchell, which is believed to be in surprisingly good condition. That craft's core will be mated to B-25 sections already on hand in order to yield one flight-capable aircraft, making it the newest of only about 30 such flight capable B-25's in existence in the U.S. The men are currently seeking 10 interested parties with a variety of skills to join the team which will recover the Sandbar Mitchell. / Photo by ALAN WARD/DAILY PRESS & ARGUS

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Sunken into the sand, covered in trees, the B-25 Mitchell bomber hasn't moved since June 1969.

A [pilot](#) flying the World War II-era 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 Sandbar Mitchell, was abandoned. Over the next 40 years, people scavenged pieces and equipment from the plane, but the middle section was left. [Mother](#) Nature transformed the sandbar into a wooded island, and the plane would probably have been forgotten.

But not by Patrick Mihalek.

The Brighton Township man has been fascinated with airplanes since he was a kid and had learned about the abandoned plane through research.

Mihalek and his close [friend](#) Todd Trainor are preparing to embark on the adventure of a lifetime.

The Brighton Township men plan to rescue and recover Sandbar Mitchell and bring it back to Michigan. It's an audacious plan

using airboats, camping in the woods and possibly facing moose and bears, and it will include a trip to Alaska next year to drag a

section of the plane on a frozen river. They plan to leave in late June for their next trip to the site.

They obtained the rights to the airplane for \$1 after talking with the owner's family.

"It's a dream come true because it's the start of the museum," Mihalek said. The airplane mechanic, who also restores planes, wants to open a museum to showcase World War II aircraft and [shares](#) his passion for planes.

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Patrick Mihalek examines the wing of Sandbar Mitchell, a B-25 that went down in Alaska in 1969 when both engines failed. / Submitted photo

"The B-25 has been a love of mine since I was a little kid," he said.

Mihalek and Trainor have traveled across the country looking for parts of old airplanes. Trainor, a project manager for Hewlett Packard, has a hangar attached to his house, which is at Brighton Airport off Hyne Road.

The hangar is packed full of parts of various planes, including the front section of another B-25. The two men plan to attach this front section to the rescued piece from Alaska. Mihalek said there are only 34 B-25 plans still flying in the world.

Trainor said rich people and big museums typically are the only ones who attempt such a project because it's so expensive.

"We're just two guys with shallow pockets," Trainor said.

They're hoping to raise funds for this project and have launched a website, <http://www.sandbarmitchell.org>.

Without much money, Mihalek has been able to obtain pieces of airplanes through persistence. His story of a young guy trying to start a museum has won the hearts of airplane enthusiasts.

"I've been doing this thing so far on a Ramen Noodle budget," he said.

He figured it will take \$250,000 to completely restore the B-25. It's 54 feet long and 67 feet wide. The Sandbar Mitchell was sold after the war and had been used as a fire-suppression aircraft.

The plane will be part of his Warbirds of Glory Museum. Trainor has launched his Aeronca Aircraft History Museum at <http://www.aeroncamuseum.org>.

The project took flight when Mihalek traveled to Oklahoma to pick up the front section of a B-25. He stopped by a local airplane museum, and there was stack of old magazines near the counter. The magazine on top had a big story about Sandbar Mitchell.

"It was kind of like a sign," he said. "Here is this airplane that is still out there."

That was in May. In January, Trainor was talking with a friend in Alaska and asked what he knew about Sandbar Mitchell. His friend hooked him up with the family, and they were able to purchase the rights for \$1.

They recently visited Alaska to check out the plane, which they said is in great shape. Despite being buried under snow for years, the dry air has helped preserve the aluminum frame.

The trip won't be for the weak-hearted.

Trainor said they might come across moose and bears, and there will be mosquitoes and black flies.

Trainor said he's been on many trips to pick up airplane pieces.

"This is the most challenging," he said.

They plan on disassembling the plane and pack as many pieces possible on an airboat.

In early 2014, they plan to put the plane's frame on a large pallet and use snowmobiles to drag it along the river.

The two men are looking for volunteers to assist with the project.

The challenges don't seem to faze them.

"I grew up with a propeller under my bed," Trainor said.

Mihalek has airplane parts scattered throughout his house, including many in his bedroom.

So what does Trainor's wife of 20 years think about this project?

"Harebrained," Todd Trainor joked.

"We've had those, but this one isn't one of those," Anna DeManaco said.

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