THE COLLINGS FOUNDATION HAS ACQUIRED A RARE P-40K THAT WILL BE CONVERTED INTO A TWO-SEAT DUAL-CONTROL TP-40N

BY MICHAEL O'LEARY

This is how the P-40K was discovered on the marshy tundra.

WARHAWK FOR COLLINGS

During June of this year, a Curtiss P-40K Warhawk located at the Evergreen Air and Space Museum, McMinnville, Oregon, was disassembled and then moved by truck to Chino, California, to begin a new chapter in its extensive career. The aircraft is P-40K USAAF 42-9749, one of numerous examples assigned to guard "the top of the world" — the Aleutian Island chain off of Alaska. Some of these islands were, of course, the only American property occupied by the Japanese during the Second World War. Bleak and hostile at the best of times, the pilots also had to cope with some of the world's worst weather — weather that could literally change in minutes.

We don't know the exact reasons concerning 42-9749's last flight — terrible weather, engine trouble? — but during 1944 the Warhawk came in for a forced landing in a marshy area near Port Heiden. The aircraft was not badly damaged and the pilot apparently escaped relatively unharmed. It is not clear how much of the aircraft the military salvaged before abandoning the airframe to the elements. However, as time went by the airframe got worse and worse.

As the Warbird Movement built during the 1970s, the Aleutians and Alaska became fertile hunting grounds for airframes, engines, and parts. In the Aleutians, literally hundreds of aircraft were written off in accidents. The majority of these machines were simply left at their last operating bases but as the years passed, the military instigated several major clean-ups that saw the damaged airframes cut up and moved off the islands for scrapping.

The short fuselage K model had a small fillet added to the vertical. (M. O'Leary)

The crew examines the badly bent airframe of the fighter.

However, since 42-9749 came down away from its base it was simply left. Apparently, some locals chopped into the wing to recover the .50-cal machine guns. In 1975, Warbird enthusiasts Al Redick and Steve Myers discovered the aircraft and made plans to remove the Curtiss fighter. Working at the top of the world, even in summer, is no easy task but the men managed to disassemble the aircraft to where it could be lifted by helicopter to Port Heiden for shipment south.

To facilitate the move, that great workhorse of the North was called in — a Curtiss C-46 Commando from Fairbanks Air. Redick and his crew, as well as everyone else standing around watching the big Commando, got to work loading the remains of the once-proud fighter. By this point, the aircraft was in many pieces and the smaller ones as well as the mangled fuselage were loaded aboard and tied down without major problems. Then

On the Aleutians, accidents to the aircraft of the 11th Air Force were an almost-daily occurrence. The inexperienced pilot of P-40K-5-CU 42-9865 lost control on landing, ground-looped, and then cartwheeled the fighter at Shemya on 13 February 1945. He was uninjured and can be seen in the right background with hands in his pockets talking to an investigator. Assigned to the 343rd Fighter Squadron, the P-40K was totaled and towed off to the base's extensive junkyard of wrecked airframes.