

MONONGAHELA MITCHELL MYSTERY

AFTER PULLING OFF A PERFECT DITCHING, THIS TB-25N DISAPPEARED FOREVER

BY HOWARD CARTER



Newspaper headline detailing the loss of the Mitchell.

The cockpit, which had moments earlier reverberated with the roar of twin Wright R-2600 radials, was now strangely quiet with just the noise of the wind washing over the airframe. In the left seat, Maj. William L. Dotson radically banked the aircraft to the left in order to line up with his chosen landing spot — the Monongahela River in Pennsylvania.

It was a freezing cold 30 January 1956 as North American TB-25N Mitchell USAAF 44-29125 prepared for its final-ev-

er landing. How had this Mitchell turned into a glider and what was its mission? For decades there has been a mystery surrounding the Mitchell's final flight so let's go to the beginning of the mission.

Mitchell 44-29125 had gone through a conversion process at Hayes Aircraft in Birmingham, Alabama, to turn the militarized B-25J into an unarmed advanced navigation and crew trainer (by 1956, over 1000 Mitchells had

passed through Hayes for conversions and various updates yet the program was exceedingly poorly photographed). Accordingly, all weapons, armor, and turrets were removed from the airframe. A new exhaust system was added to the R-2600s (Holley carburetors being replaced by Bendix-Stromberg carburetors on the R-2600s) featuring a semi-collector ring that took the exhaust from the upper seven cylinders and routed it out through a single stack. The lower cylinders had their exhaust directed out of individual ports. Hayes went through all the Mitchell systems and upgraded fuel, electrical, hydraulic, wiring, etc. Hayes conversions could be spotted by the replacement of the standard production carburetor air scoop with a larger and more rectangular intake. Some TB-25Ns were further modified with complete single-stack exhaust systems where the exhaust of all cylinders was collected into one large pipe and this considerably reduced cockpit noise.

In the cockpit area, with the removal of the top turret there was now room for two additional seats immediately behind the pilots. Most TB-25Ns were refitted with newer post-war radio and navigation systems, most notably the AN/ARN-14 omni-directional radio. Also, new or upgraded autopilots were installed to align with USAF training requirements. The USAF made a wise choice and this extended the life of the Mitchell



The Monongahela River (known as "the Mon" to locals) is not a stranger to ditched aircraft. Douglas DC-3C N24320 (built as C-47A-90-DL) being operated by Johnson Flying Service, Missoula, Montana, ditched in the river on 22 December 1954. The crew had allowed the plane to run out of fuel. "I'm out of gas, both engines feathering," was the last radio message received by the Allegheny Country Airport tower. There were 28 people on board for the military charter flight. The pilot and nine servicemen were killed. In many ways, this was a cursed aircraft. During 1949, Johnson was using it as a smoke jumper and dropped 15 fire-fighters to combat the Mann Gulch Fire. Sadly, a dozen would die in the blaze. After the Mon ditching, the plane was repaired and kept flying. On 15 December 1994, while operating with McNeely Charter Service, the aircraft was substantially damaged when it was hit on the ground at Memphis International Airport by a FedEx Cessna Caravan. In 2018, it was restored as *Miss Montana* and is now part of the Museum of Mountain Flying.

considerably and Hayes-modified TB-25N 44-30854 was the last Mitchell in USAF inventory and it made its last flight during May 1960 when it flew to Eglin AFB.

On this January day in 1960, there were still nearly 75 Mitchells flying with the USAF but they were being withdrawn one by one and flown to Davis-Monthan AFB for storage and later sale to the public. USAF 44-29125 was positioned at Nellis AFB in Nevada and the intended destination was mapped out as a flight to Olmsted AFB in Pennsylvania. The purpose

of the flight was to transport "aircraft parts" and to deliver two passengers to Andrews AFB in Maryland. As noted, the main pilot was Maj. Dotson and also on board were Capt. John Jamieson, pilot; Capt. Steve Tabak, pilot; S/Sgt. Walter Soocey, crew chief; AM2 Charles Smith, crew chief; Capt. J.P. Ingraham and M/Sgt. Alfred Alleman, passengers.

After starting the engines and doing the run-up, the Mitchell departed Nellis and turned east during the climb-out with no problems reported as the



TB-25N Mitchells such as this aircraft filled an important USAF training role during the 1950s. Many of these aircraft would be sold surplus to form the majority of today's Mitchell Warbirds.