

BRAVO 369 Flight Foundation



Pilots Brave Challenges of Once Secret Air Route to Russia

BRAVO 369 Flight Foundation completes round trip test flight to Alaska

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The BRAVO 369 Flight Foundation announced this week the successful completion of their training mission to Fairbanks, Alaska as part of a film documentary and flight re-creation project called "Warplanes to Siberia," the story of the secret delivery of military aircraft between the United States and the Soviet Union during WWII.

Jeff Geer, President of the foundation said "We truly re-lived the life of a 7th Ferrying Squadron pilot right down to the vintage 1942 North American AT-6 Texan we were flying." During their flight to Fairbanks, Geer and Alan Anders, owner of the T-6, were joined by Mark Kandianis piloting his Cessna 206 as a logistics aircraft along with Elizabeth Ackerly, a Boeing 777 First Officer with American Airlines.

The team made stops at airfields along the historic Alaska-Siberia (ALSIB) route beginning in Great Falls, MT and then into Alberta, Northern BC, the Yukon, and Alaska. During the war, nearly 8,000 military aircraft were flown year round up this route. "Since we were flying Visual Flight Rules (VFR), we had to leave Bellingham (WA) two days early to get over the North Cascades mountain range to Great Falls due to an approaching storm system. "We were delayed for several days in Dawson Creek, BC and then got into some flyable but rapidly deteriorating weather conditions as we approached Fort Nelson, BC" said Geer.

Geer continued "What is so amazing is the pilots who flew these aircraft up the ALSIB route did not have reliable charts and faced all kinds of bad weather which was one of the main reasons there were so many casualties. Even though we were in a vintage aircraft, we had the modern conveniences of advanced avionics, including GPS and satellite communications. At night we had modern creature comforts of a hotel room, hot showers, and good food - they didn't. And to think that once they got to Fairbanks they had to hop on to an unheated C-47 transport and go back to Great Falls to do it over and over and over again. The entire flight crew gained a whole new respect for these pilots and their sacrifices, and their contribution to Lend-Lease effort." The round trip flight between Great Falls and Fairbanks is approximately 4,000 miles.

While in Great Falls, the BRAVO 369 flight team was greeted enthusiastically by news media, airport officials and Holman Aviation, the fixed base operator at the airport. Historically, Great Falls was the staging base for the ferrying flights en route to Alaska and Russia and home of Army Air Corps 7th Aircraft Ferrying Group. Geer also spent time with Montana Governor Steve Bullock briefing him on the flight project and discussing the importance that Great Falls played during WWII.

On July 4 while in Fairbanks Alaska, Geer and Anders participated in the Centennial of Aviation in Alaska by flying in a formation of four T-6 Texans in recognition of the first airplane flight in Alaska 100 years earlier to the day. Geer was later interviewed at the ALSIB memorial in downtown Fairbanks by CBS affiliate KXD TV. "It was an honor to be interviewed at the ALSIB memorial, it was a surreal moment for me. For the past six years of planning this flight the memorial was nothing more than a symbolic photo. Having flown the first leg of the ALSIB route, experiencing the life of a 7th Ferrying Squadron pilot and standing before this beautiful memorial was truly an honor and something I will never forget. The memorial is a great tribute to those who have flown the route before us and those who gave their lives delivering aircraft to the Soviets" Geer said.

In an address to Congress in 1945, Franklin Delano Roosevelt said ""The structure of world peace cannot be the work of one man, or one party, or one nation...it must be a peace which rests on the cooperative effort of the whole world." The story of the Alaska-Siberia Lend-Lease program is as important now as it was then. It serves as a reminder of the great sacrifices and cooperation between the United States, Canada and Russia, yet most people in the world have never heard of it or know if its significance. According to Geer "Warplanes to Siberia" is gaining international attention as it brings this story to the forefront. "Our plan is to fly to Krasnoyarsk, an additional 3,000 miles across Siberia, beginning in July 2014; however, there are many things we need to accomplish before we can proceed. Safety, historical accuracy and the mutual cooperation between our great nations are our top priorities. We have proven our ability to plan and fly the first leg of this route safely and effectively. We now need to take that next giant step."

Now 68 years later in the midst of cooling relations between the United States and Russia, the BRAVO 369 Flight Foundation believes this flight project may mean more than re-creating history for an educational documentary. This may be a goodwill ambassador flight reminding the world that we were once allies serving the greater cause of freedom.

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