



Photo by Norris Kestman

A National Guard Skycrane helicopter lowers the PBV, known as "The Queen of Dago Lake," onto the tundra near the Iliamna airport Aug. 8.

Guard gets WWII aircraft almost back to Anchorage

by Heidi Bradner
for the Tundra Times

ILIAMNA — A nine-year effort to salvage a piece of Alaska's aviation history, a World War II PBV Catalina, was delayed Aug. 8 after a broken lift strap prevented the Alaska Air National Guard from bringing the vintage aircraft all the way into Anchorage.

Despite the mishap, the Guard managed to set the PBV down unharmed in Lake Clark Pass, about 125 miles southwest of Anchorage.

They will resume the project as soon as a new strap is found, probably within a week's time, they said.

The lift, in which the plane was rigged to a CH-54B Sikorsky Skycrane helicopter, was the last of three necessary to bring the gutted Catalina to Anchorage.

Guardsmen had previously transported the 63-foot long amphibian aircraft from the shore of Dago Lake, 400 miles southwest of Anchorage on

(Continued on Page Five)

• Plane to be restored

(Continued from Page One)

the Alaska Peninsula, to King Salmon in 1984 and later from King Salmon to Iliamna.

The recovery was broken up into three stages so that the skycrane could be refueled on the ground by a Hercules C-130.

"It becomes a sort of flying gas tank. We put extra fuel in the C-130 wings and pump it out to the skycrane and to the support aircraft. We are landing because we need to refuel the helicopters on the ground," said Sgt. Gary Franklin.

The Guard became involved at the request of the Alaskan Historical Aircraft Society. They are using the PBY lifts as training missions.

"This is probably one of the largest salvage operations of World War II aircraft that I've ever heard of by airlift," said Mission Commander Gary Quarles, pilot of the skycrane flying the 10,000 pound plane to Anchorage.

The OA-10 "flying boat" was forced to land on a large shallow lake in Western Alaska after blowing an engine over the area in 1947, according to Ted Spencer, president of the Alaska Aviation Heritage Museum, the plane's owner.

Prior to the 1984 lift, the Catalina lay at Dago Lake for 37 years. Spencer said his group had been working on moving it since 1978, when he spotted it while looking for a downed P-40 reportedly in the area.

"The airplane appears to the casual

observer to be an eroded piece of junk," Spencer said. "Its historical significance is in its type.

"There are fewer and fewer of these planes, and they are starting to go into museums."

After unsuccessful attempts to install a new engine, the military eventually advertised the PBY as surplus, he said. An Anchorage man bought the naval-type sea plane on a second uncontested bid for \$56 in 1947. Discovering the plane's damage, he eventually sold the usable items on the plane, leaving the structure intact at the lake.

Through the years, it became a navigational aid and a familiar landmark, acquiring the nickname the "Queen of Dago Lake," Spencer said. "The lake was renamed PBY lake."

The man donated the plane to the Alaskan Historical Aircraft Society in 1983 for the purposes of restoration and public display.

Developed in 1935, PBYs were used prior to the war for coastal surveying. They were used extensively during World War II in the Aleutian Islands and in the Philippines, Spencer said. However, his organization's aircraft saw no combat, he said, and did not arrive in Alaska until 1945.

After the war, the naval-type sea planes were used primarily on search and rescue missions by the United States Air Force. Some were used in Southeast Alaska as airliners and, until 1985, some were firebombers.

Spencer hopes to restore and keep the airplane on public display in the Alaska Aviation Heritage Museum, scheduled to open April 15, 1988, at Lake Hood.