

Close-up of Wallen's bronze sculpture of a Russian WWII aviator in cold-weather flying gear

Sanibel Soldiers Land in Alaska

Despite the challenges of distance and a spate of hurricanes, sculptor R.T. Wallen creates a monument in Sanibel destined for a home in Alaska

by Lynn Wallen

A monumental bronze sculpture, created on the East End of Sanibel Island, now stands on a granite plinth at its permanent home in Alaska, four thousand miles away. The sculpture portrays two World War II pilots, one Russian and one American, dressed in cold-weather gear and standing in front of the propeller of a P-39 Airacobra. Traveling by land and sea from the southernmost state to the northernmost, the two bronze aviators now serve as the centerpiece of a new park along the Chena River in downtown Fairbanks.

The monument celebrates the World War II Lend-Lease Program, particularly the delivery of nearly eight thousand warplanes from the U.S. to the U.S.S.R., and was sponsored by the Alaska-Siberia Research Center, which sought funding from the U.S. Congress and the State of Alaska. Airplanes built in the

U.S. were flown across the U.S. and Canada to Fairbanks, where they were met by Soviet pilots who ferried them across Siberia to the war fronts.

For almost two years, sculptor R.T. Wallen worked on the monument in a large garage next door to the house he lived in on the island's East End. He had rented the house for a working vacation in the summer of 2003, planning to stay only long enough to create the maquettes (study models) for his sculpture. He wasn't sure where he would do the monumental piece—his permanent studio in Juneau, Alaska, would not accommodate the ten-foot-high pilots. Just about the time the maquettes were completed, the next-door neighbors arrived for their annual visit. One day Wallen was visiting and took the short-cut entry through the garage. He commented on the high ceiling, and it ended up that the neighbor offered the use of

his garage as a studio.

"My pilots were going to be ten feet tall. The ceiling was ten feet, three inches. As I got to working on them, I needed an extra couple of inches of height to work on the tops of the heads, so Don let me cut a hole in his garage ceiling! He also allowed us to install an air conditioner, not only for my comfort but to prevent the clay from getting too soft and slumping," said Wallen.

As if finding a studio next door wasn't fortuitous enough, Wallen got to know the neighbor two doors down, Sanibel's most famous artist, Lucas Century. Century became interested in the project and contributed his unique skills to produce glass molds for details such as uniform buttons and military medals. Everything was falling into place so easily that Wallen couldn't believe his good fortune.

"The stars had lined up to allow me



Above: Completed WWII monument. Left: The final cleanup touches before the dedication of the WWII monument in Fairbanks, Alaska.



to live and work on Sanibel Island for the duration of the project and have Luc's help," said Wallen. "It seemed too good to be true."

Then came Hurricane Charley.

In August of 2004, with the ten-foot-high Russian pilot partially completed, Wallen had to prepare for evacuation from the island.

"Luc and I cut the head off the pilot and secured it on the top shelf of an interior closet in my house," recalled Wallen. "With the help of other neighbors, we lifted the body off the floor and battened it down horizontally across sawhorses in the garage/studio. Then we all headed for the mainland."

A week later, when island residents were permitted to return, Wallen found an eighteen-inch high watermark around the wall, evidence of the storm surge that had flooded the studio. The owners' Cadillac, which had shared the space, was totaled. Water had come

within a few inches of the sculpture. Three other hurricanes threatened Sanibel that summer, but the Russian pilot survived them all. "That pilot had some narrow escapes," said Wallen, "not unlike many of the WWII ferry pilots in their flights across the Far North."

Because of delays caused by four hurricanes that summer, the project was behind schedule. Wallen's brother Robert and his wife Susan drove down from Wisconsin to help. Work on the American pilot and the propeller continued over the winter of 2004 and was completed in the summer of 2005. Crating and shipping the figures to the foundry in Oregon ended the Sanibel phase of the project in September. Near the end, Wallen's "studio" was opened to visitors for a day as part of a BIG Arts fund-raising tour of local artists' studios.

Wallen, a confirmed Alaskan and forty-year resident of the state,



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A neighbor let Wallen cut a hole in his garage ceiling to accommodate the ten-foot Russian aviator.

admitted, “It was hard to leave Sanibel after being full-time residents for two and a half years. We’d like to find a way to spend more time here.”

The dedication of the monument in Fairbanks took place in August of 2006. Lucas Century and his wife Dee Serage-Century attended, and the ceremony was filmed for WGCU television in Fort Myers, so Florida, the birthplace of the sculpture, was represented at the event. Because the monument memorializes the cooperation between the nations of the U.S., Canada, and the Soviet Union, dignitaries from these countries participated in the dedication events. France and Great Britain were also represented at the ceremony. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld gave a stirring speech about the bravery of the pilots who flew across the vast uncharted wilderness of

Canada, Alaska, and Siberia. Pioneering the routes in unheated cockpits in temperatures of sixty-five degrees below zero, with few emergency landing fields for thousands of miles, these pilots were heroes, and some of them attended the dedication. One was Lt. Col. (Ret.) James Miller, chief test pilot of the Lend-Lease aircraft headed for Russia. Based in Great Falls, Montana, where the aircraft were tested and winterized, decorated combat pilot Jim Miller personally test-flew over 1,350 of the aircraft in the years 1942-1944.

“He’s a remarkable man,” reported Wallen. “With his phenomenal memory for detail, he helped me a lot in my background research. And he wore his original uniform to the dedication.”

Two members of the Women’s Air Service Pilots (WASP) also attended the

ceremony. WASP flew many of the airplanes from the factories to Great Falls, the official starting point of the ALSIB Airway. Beyond that point, however, they were not permitted to fly. Regulations limiting women pilots to domestic flying precluded their ferrying the planes over Canada to the territory of Alaska.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov and Alaska’s Senator Stevens and Governor Murkowski spoke about the benefits of cooperation between the two countries, both during WWII and now, as our nations have moved beyond the cold war into a new era. The Consuls General of France and Great Britain and the Canadian Deputy Commander of North American Aerospace Defense (NORAD) recalled the value of the alliances during that period of history. World War II veterans at the ceremony remembered their parts in the war, and the younger generations honored the heroism of those who participated in the great effort.

Now, on the long Alaska winter nights, the two WWII aviators stand beneath the haunting sweep of the Aurora Borealis, a light dusting of snow on their bronze shoulders. During the long summer days, the midnight sun warms them as they scan the skies to the southeast, where the warplanes bound for Russia appeared over sixty years ago. 🙏

Lynn Wallen is the wife of the artist and a former copyeditor at Times of the Islands.