

## Treed & Freed; Airplane Recovery in Central Jersey

By Jim "Buck" Sorrenti

On Sept. 25, 2019, Mike Sena, owner and operator of Mike's Towing & Recovery in Bridgewater, New Jersey, received a call from the Central Jersey Airport requesting that he handle the complete recovery of a single-engine Cessna 172 airplane that crashed the day before. The plane was suspended about 75' up, on top of trees in the middle of the woods on State Park Commission land.

A 32-year-old pilot was on his way to the airport in Hillsborough when the Cessna 172, owned by Tri-State Aviation, suffered an engine stall and crashed into the trees. The pilot was stuck in the trees for about four hours before Keiling Tree Care helped rescue him. The plane remained suspended above the ground for about three days.

All heavy equipment was needed: two large excavators, a Caterpillar 325 excavator with bucket and a 333 with clamp attachment and a Caterpillar D6 Dozer, were brought to the site after hours.

Mike's also brought its 2014 Peterbilt 388 tractor hooked to a 2017 Landoll trailer which was used to transport his 135' shooting boom JLG all-terrain machine to and from the recovery area. An oversize permit was needed.

At 7 a.m. on Sept. 26, the crews were in full swing. They did not stop until the road was cut in and the complete site was cleared of all necessary trees. Besides the heavy equipment there were five men with chainsaws dropping trees to be cleared with the machines.

"This particular recovery proved to be a challenge due to the heavily wooded area where the plane went down," Sena said. "After waiting for the FAA and NTSB inspection, we had the entire land cleared in a single day. Under normal circumstances this would have been a two-day job minimum. This was a very time-sensitive recovery because the park police could not leave the location until the plane was recovered and off of the property. Police were stationed there 24/7."

Sena, lead supervisor on scene, responded along with MTR operators Gene Meeks, Dirk Beasley and Rich Weinreich. All necessary equipment was scheduled to arrive at 8:30 a.m. on Sept. 27.

MTR's 2020 Peterbilt 389 tractor with sleeper hooked to a 2019 Landoll 440 53' trailer rolled in carrying his Gehle 552 all-terrain extendable-reach forklift. That would transport the recovery trailer off tarmac and into the woods. The Landoll would also be used to transport the plane to Hangar No. 7 at the airport.

Mike's 2006 Peterbilt 335/Century 3212 16-ton medium-duty wrecker arrived pulling the 18' Featherlite recovery trailer. This trailer was equipped with everything that might be needed: straps, shackles, clevis pins, chainsaws and more.

"Perhaps the most important pieces in the trailer are the safety radio headsets used on all recovery jobs. We have sets (eight headsets) of Sonetics wireless headsets," Sena said. "These proved invaluable throughout the entire recovery process. Every person on scene had a headset on and was able to communicate with one another. For safety reasons everyone was in constant total communication. This absolutely helped make a smoother and faster recovery.

"The 50-ton truck mounted crane with a 135-foot stick was also setting up," Sena said, "so we had the crane and our 135-foot shooting boom truck on one side and Keiling Tree Care's specialized, 8748 spider, 85-foot boom lift remote-control track machine on the other side."

Once everything was in place, the airport was shut down, the boom on the crane was extended fully, all straps were installed for safe lifting and the plane was raised off and out of the trees, boomed around and set gently on the ground. The airport was given the OK to re-open.

Rigging was then removed from the plane and was re-rigged with straps, transported out of the wooded area and carried out to the roadway via the excavator and set onto MTR's Landoll. The casualty was properly strapped down and transport back to the Central Jersey Regional Airport.

The extendable-reach forklift was brought to the airport and the plane was lifted off of the Landoll, set on the ground and pushed into Hangar No. 7 for investigation.

Many thanks to MTR operators Gene Meeks and Rich Weinreich for the outstanding photos and to Joyce Powers for providing much needed additional information on this very technical recovery.

*Editor's Note: Look for the detailed version of this recovery in an upcoming issue of American Towman Magazine.*

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