

SURVIVAL AGAINST AN ICY WILDERNESS

LIEUTENANT David Steeves grinned confidently. Giving a cheery wave to his fellow flyers on the tarmac at Hamilton Air Force Base in California, he walked with brisk steps to a Lockheed T-33 jet training plane waiting on the runway.

The sun, beating down from a brilliantly clear sky, glinted on the fuselage as Steeves climbed into the cockpit and closed the transparent canopy above his head.

Before him was a mass of switches and dials controlling the plane's powerful jet engine, with its thrust of over five thousand pounds. Meticulously, Steeves went through the take-off procedure. Over his headphones, he heard the base flight controller giving him clearance for take off. Taxiing into the wind, Steeves began his trip along the runway and eased the Lockheed into the air.

Swiftly, the ground fell away as Steeves climbed to 38,000 ft. (over 11,000 metres) and levelled off. Twenty-three year old Steeves' was one of the base's most promising pupils, and on this May day in 1957, he prepared to enjoy this training flight in his two-seater Lockheed.

Below him, the Californian countryside whirled and rose and fell as he went through his training programme of turns, dives and climbs. Soon, he was over the High Sierras, a vast range of mountains which extends over hundreds of miles. Among them is America's highest peak, Mount Whitney. Even in the springs of California, it was winter in the mountains . . . a wilderness of ice and snow.

Everything was going swimmingly. Then, without warning, it happened!

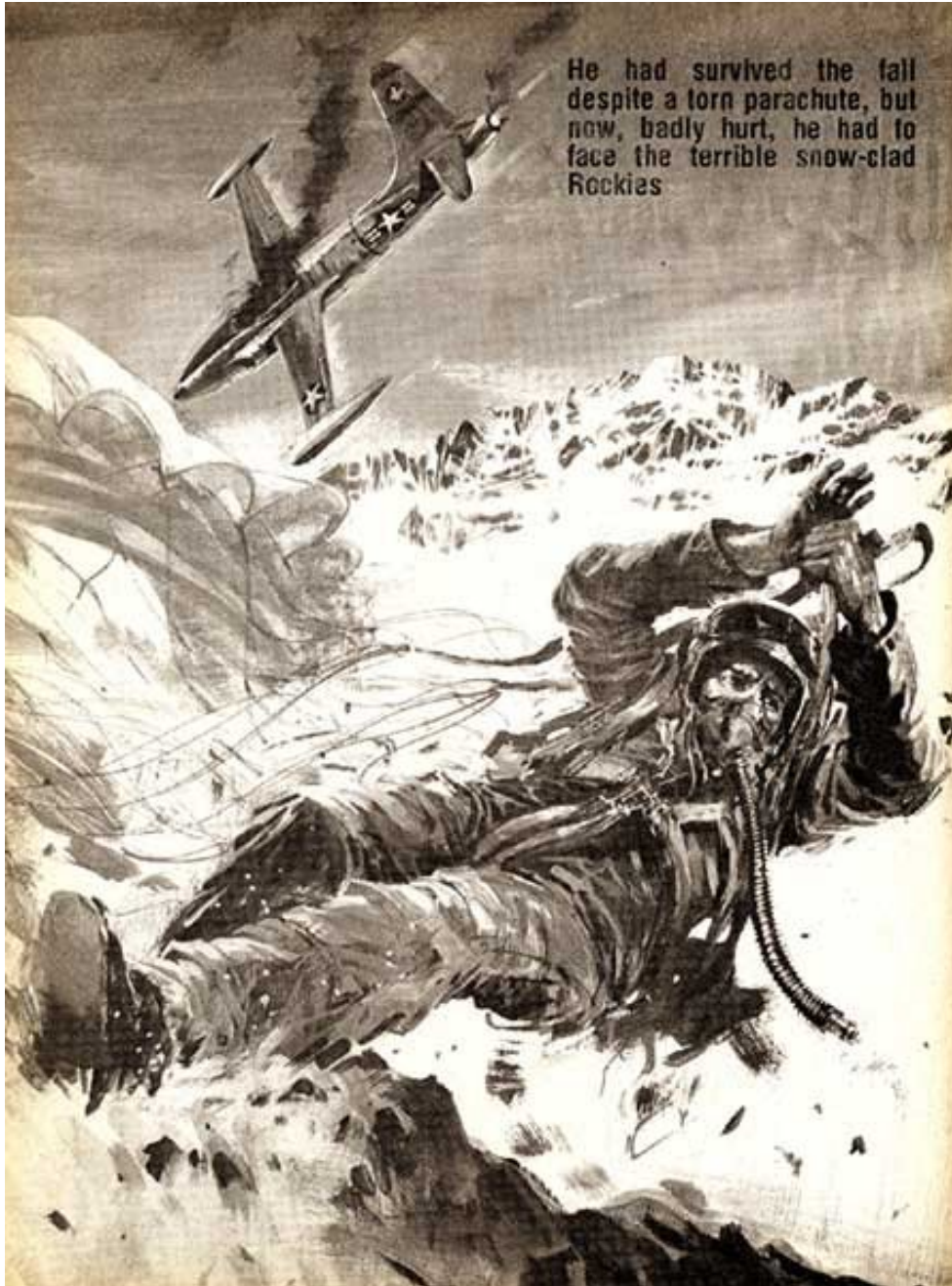
An explosion suddenly tore the little jet training plane apart. Steeves slumped forward in his seat, knocked into unconsciousness by the powerful blast. With the limp pilot supported by his straps, the plane began to spin helplessly towards the treacherous mountain peaks a long way below.

MIRACLE ESCAPE

Steeves slowly regained consciousness to find himself in a cockpit full of smoke with his plane spiralling earthwards. Instinctively, Steeves dived for the controls and, for a few vital seconds, he fought to regain mastery of his aircraft. But his efforts were fruitless.

Knowing that his only chance of survival was to eject, Steeves jabbed at the appropriate button and, a split second later, was hurtling out of the plane. His parachute opened and he

began falling to Earth . . . too fast. Gazing upwards at the canopy billowing above him, Steeves saw that two of its panels had been ripped.



Hardly had this registered on his brain, before he hit the mountainside with such force that he sprained both his ankles and slithered into a cushioning snowdrift. Fighting the pain, Steeves staggered into a sitting position and began to take stock of his situation.

He was wearing a light summer uniform that gave little protection against the north-eastern wind that sliced into him like a knife. All around him was a wilderness of ice and snow. For his survival, Steeves had only a service revolver, two half-used books of matches, a little money and, his treasured possession, a photograph of his wife and baby daughter.

Blue with cold, Steeves crawled behind a rocky ridge for shelter, wrapping his parachute around him for warmth. For three days and night he remained there. From time to time, he



looked at the picture of his wife and daughter and knew that if only for their sakes, he had to get out of the icy waste alive.

Any hope of being found by planes from his base faded on the fourth morning. Steeves knew that he had to make his own way back to civilisation. Fighting the pain, he pulled himself to his feet, drew his parachute about his face and began staggering along the snowy mountain trail. At night, he dug a bed in the snow and snuggled down in it. Each day, the same process was gone through . . . again and again.

CABIN IN THE CANYON

For two weeks, the routine remained unaltered until, on the evening of the momentous 14th day, Steeves stumbled into a huge rocky canyon, its sheer walls reaching skywards. Within their protection was a cabin, built of logs by a hunter. Staggering inside, Steeves found a life-saving supply of food. Tins of beans and ham, sugar and a packet of dried soup . . . it was more than he had ever dared to hope for.

Fortunately, Steeves carried a knife, and with this he opened the cans and had the best meal of his life. Afterwards, content at last, he found some sacking to make a bed and fell deeply asleep.

Morning brought bright sunshine, and Steeves saw that his supply of food would soon be exhausted. He would have to follow the example of the man who had built the cabin and become a hunter, for there were deer in the canyon.

To catch the deer, Steeves built a trap with his revolver connected to a trip wire. It worked one morning when Steeves was too deeply asleep to hear it. Mountain lions had eaten most of the carcass by the time Steeves got to it, but there was enough meat left for him to make a meal of it -- raw.

In this fashion, Steeves managed to survive in the wilderness, eating what he could catch and drinking melted snow. Each day, he was getting fitter and stronger and, by the thirtieth day, he felt sufficiently recovered from his ordeal to try to reach civilization.

Off he set across the side of the mountain, not knowing whether he was taking a route to civilisation or more trouble. He struck the latter when he found his way out of the canyon barred by a crashine torrent of water, turned into a fast-flowing death trap by the melting snows.



It was clearly impassable, and Steeves made his way back to his cabin and rested again. But still freedom beckoned, and eventually on 30th June he was in a fit state to set off again. This time, he travelled in a different direction.

Luck was with him for, on the following day, he was spotted by two hunters warming themselves and having a meal by their camp fire. The figure which stumbled towards them looked like a long lost castaway. Steeves' cheeks were sunken and streaked with thorn cuts, and his clothes had been ripped to shreds.

But after 53 days on the mountain, injured and without much hope of being found again, Lieutenant David Steeves was safe. His days of horror in the wilderness were over.

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Hero or hoax? Public doubted pilot's story of survival

Air Force Lt. David Steeves was declared dead after he went missing on a training flight. He reappeared 54 days later in the Sierra, but suspicions arose when his plane couldn't be found. Two decades later, a discovery proved his word.

October 17, 2010 | Steve Harvey

On May 9, 1957, Air Force Lt. David Steeves, piloting a T-33 training jet, took off from Hamilton Air Force Base, near San Francisco, on a flight to Arizona. Then, like a character in the television show the "Twilight Zone," he disappeared.

Days passed, then weeks. When no trace of Steeves or the plane was found, the Air Force declared the 23-year-old pilot officially dead.

But, 54 days after he vanished, a gaunt, bearded Steeves, filthy clothing hanging from his body, hobbled into a camp in the remote backcountry of Kings Canyon National Park, east of Fresno. He told an almost unbelievable tale of survival.

"Something in the plane exploded" and he blacked out, he said. When he regained consciousness, he ejected from the out-of-control jet, badly injuring both ankles when he landed.

Without food or shelter for 15 days, he survived freezing temperatures at 12,000 feet while "crawling, slipping and sliding to safety over 20 torturous miles of high country considered impassable even now to trained mountaineers," The Times reported.

"All I had to keep warm with was my parachute, so I wrapped up in it," Steeves said.

Eventually, he found an abandoned National Park Service cabin and broke in. He found a few cans of food as well as a fisherman's fly kit. He caught fish and trapped and killed a deer at a salt lick using his .32-caliber pistol and a piece of string, he said.

After regaining some of his strength, he tried to cross the rain-swollen Kings River but nearly drowned and lost some of the clothes he had tied around his neck.

Luckily, he stumbled upon a pack-train guide who took him by horse to civilization.

"My ankles are still swollen — otherwise I guess I'm okay," the pilot told reporters a couple of days later after being flown to Lockheed Air Terminal (now Bob Hope Airport) in Burbank. The Air Force found him lodging that night at the Knickerbocker Hotel in Hollywood, a stopover en route to a reunion with his wife, Rita, at their home in Trumbull, Conn.

Steeves became a media sensation of sorts.

He appeared as a guest on several television shows, including Art Linkletter's "House Party."

"There was talk of a movie," said San Diego-area author Eric Blehm, who is writing a book about Steeves. "His life rights were optioned."

Steeves "liked the whole Hollywood persona," said Blehm. "He was handsome, smoked pipes and cigars, drove a beautiful Corvette and he was a happy-go-lucky jet pilot — the 'Top Gun' Tom Cruise of his era."

The Lost Lockheed T-33

David Steeves 1957

The Lockheed T-33A Shooting Star Two-Seat Trainer.

Forty years ago a young Air Force pilot disappeared on a routine mission in the West. 54 days later 1st Lt. David Steeves, long declared dead, emerged from the snowy Sierra Nevada with two sprained ankles, a full beard and a survival tale featuring pluck and a canned ham.

His tumultuous homecoming turned to suspicion when his T-33 training jet could not be found, giving rise to rumors that hounded him for the rest of his life and were dispelled only after his death.

On May 9 1957, a 23-year-old pilot took off alone from Hamilton Air Force Base near San Francisco, headed to Craig Air Force Base near Selma, Ala., when he disappeared.

Rescue missions found nothing. The Air Force declared Steeves legally dead, and mailed a certificate saying so to his mother in Trumbull, Conn. But 54 days after the crash he came out of the Sierra Nevada alive.

Steeves told reporters "something blew up" in the cockpit shortly after he took off and he parachuted over California's rugged southern Sierra. He didn't eat for two weeks, then found a ranger's cabin in Kings Canyon National Park where he found fish hooks, beans and a canned ham.

Weeks later, after wandering more than 20 miles, he stumbled upon some campers and told them who he was. He was treated like a hero. But when his T-33 could not be found, the cheering died.

Rumor and innuendo found its way to Steeves. One scenario had him selling the jet to Russia, and another shipping it piecemeal to Mexico. It was the late 1950s and a time when Americans were told to keep an eye out for Communists and attempts to infiltrate the nation.

The Saturday Evening Post reneged on a \$10,000 story offer after its writer said he found discrepancies in Steeves' story, although they weren't explained at the time. Steeves' young wife left him, taking their toddler daughter.

The Air Force investigated. Although the inquiry never led to charges, it ruined Steeves' career. He was granted his request to return to civilian life.

He found work as a commercial pilot and designing parachute planes, but he spent years searching for his jet, renting planes and scouring the countryside.

In 1965, he died in a plane crash while demonstrating one of his new designs.

It wasn't until 12 years later, in 1977, that the mystery was solved. Some Boy Scouts hiking through Kings Canyon National Park came across a cockpit cover in the mountains. There was a serial number on the piece, and it matched Steeves' missing T-33.

50 Years Later: Bravery Outshines Public Humiliation

By [David Paulin](#)

Fifty years ago this month, President Eisenhower and Sputnik were in the news -- and so were the marital travails of an Air Force pilot named David Steeves. The 23-year-old lieutenant -- once a national hero -- was now under a cloud of innuendo and suspicion stirred up by the nation's news media.

Decades before media abuse became a hotly debated topic, Lt. Steeves was a victim of it, suffering a public humiliation he did not deserve. The Air Force, for its part, may have contributed to this guilt-by-innuendo. But ultimately it was the mainstream media that put the pilot's head in a noose in the court of public opinion.

In its watchdog role, the media should have endeavored to get to the bottom of the case of Lt. Steeves and his missing T-33 jet trainer. Instead, it played up the sensational aspects of the case, thereby helping to destroy an Air Force officer's reputation.

Lt. Steeves captivated the nation that previous July 1, 1957 when he wandered out of California's Sierra Nevada. Weeks earlier, the Air Force had declared him dead after he disappeared on a cross-country flight. Yet 54 days after ejecting from his disabled jet over ice and snow-covered mountains, he hobbled out of the wilderness with a heavy beard and tattered flight suit. In a hastily arranged news conference at Castle Air Force Base in Merced, California, he told a harrowing story of survival that captivated the nation.

Steeves was front-page news for days, a media darling. And his photogenic 21-year-old wife Rita quickly became part of the story. There were TV and radio appearances, even talk of a book deal. But six weeks later, the story of Lt. Steeves, the hero, fell apart after the *Saturday Evening Post* claimed to have found "discrepancies" in his survival story. The weekly magazine's claims were not fully explained at first, and when they were explained months later, they proved baseless. But no matter. Thereafter, there was a media pile on.

The Steeves-as-hero narrative was quickly scrapped, and recast. Now he was a man telling tall tales -- perhaps even perpetrating a hoax (though for what purpose was never explained).

And though not apart of their official narrative, some reporters may have heard wild rumors said to be floating about, or that were slipped to them by conspiracy-minded Cold Warriors in the Air Force or Pentagon: Steeves flew his jet to Mexico, then sold it to the Russians or some other malevolent nation.

None of this ever proved true. And in 1957 there was no evidence that it *might* be true. Yet this was of no consequence to the vast majority of media outlets. Putting on their brass knuckles, they went on a journalistic gang bang, trampling facts and decency as they infused story after story about Lt. Steeves with suspicion and reckless innuendo. And no matter that top officials in the U.S. Park Service and U.S. Air Force (those speaking on the record) supported Steeves' story. A close reading of newspaper archives, primarily from 1957 and 1958, makes this crystal clear.

Just a few years earlier, ironically, crusading members of the high-minded Fourth Estate told themselves they'd saved the country from Wisconsin's irresponsible senator, Joe McCarthy. Yet now they engaged in what amounted to McCarthy-style reporting on Lt. Steeves and his wife Rita. Both eventually moved on with their lives, perhaps owing to their faith and resilient spirits, though the media's glare may have complicated their already troubled marriage.

The story of Lt. David Steeves started on a clear and sunny day on May 9, 1957 as he soared over the High

Sierras at 33,500 feet. As he later related, an explosion ripped through his T-33 jet. He blacked out, regained consciousness and then ejected over some of America's roughest terrain. After a few weeks, the Air Force sent his wife a death certificate, believing nobody could have survived in the icy and snowy mountains.

"I was officially a widow," she related. "I had to start a new life." Determined to be strong and positive, she enrolled in a local university near her husband's hometown of Trumbull, Connecticut to become a school teacher. "I knew I must now be the head of my family -- families, I know, can fall apart when there's a death. I resolved this would not happen to us."

Survival Story

Yet her husband was alive, and fighting for his life.

In published accounts, Steeves wilderness ordeal reads like a Hollywood script. One top Air Force officer called it a "remarkable feat."

Two of Lt. Steeves' parachute panels were burned out, so he landed hard at the 11,000-foot level, badly twisting his ankles as he hit snow and ice. He had no survival kit or warm clothes to protect himself against temperatures that, according to an accident report obtained for this article, ranged between 25 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit. Bundling himself in his parachute, he huddled against giant boulders to stay out of the wind for the first four days. Then he gave up that a rescue party would be coming.

Setting off down the mountain, he told of crawling, sliding, and hobbling for 15 days, consuming only melted snow, until coming upon an empty ranger's cabin 15 miles away. There he found enough food to regain his strength. He told of then living on dandelions, grass snakes, and fish caught with some rusty hooks he found. Utilizing a snare rigged to his revolver, he even killed a deer.

Park rangers estimated he wandered 20 to 40 miles in attempting to hike out of the wildest part of the Sierra Nevada, where imposing peaks, canyons, and raging streams would challenge even an experienced mountaineer. He shed about 40 pounds from his fit 6-foot 195 pound frame, and his wife later commented that he felt "skinny." Hunger, however, was the least of Steeves' worries, according to a lengthy article by [noted](#) journalist William E. Peters in the January 1958 issue of *Redbook*.

He wrote, "There were times when he told himself he had gone mad, that he was dead and this was some form of icy hell. In waves of panic he felt he was being punished for his sins; he prayed for forgiveness, despaired, then prayed some again."

Although raised in a church-going family, Steeves said he didn't consider himself deeply religious, though he said he enjoyed Billy Graham's sermons. Later, he admitted to shortcomings as a father and husband. Yet in the wilderness, it was thoughts of "God, my wife, and my baby daughter" that pulled him through, he always maintained.

'Incoherent with Joy'

Steeves came upon two campers in Kings Canyon National Park on July 1, 1957, and one took him to a ranger's station on horseback. He promptly phoned home.

Describing her once-dead son's call, his mother told reporters he "felt every prayer" said for him. His wife Rita, no longer a widow, was too "incoherent with joy" to make much sense according to a reporter who tried to interview her shortly after the call. But she later described her feelings with a burst of eloquence: "I'm afraid at this point the experience is taking its effect, it's true. It's marvelously true. That's all I can say. I don't know what to do. I'm usually a pretty rational person but this thing is beyond the bounds of rationalization. I don't know what bounds it's beyond but it certainly is marvelous."

After these initial stories, the media shifted its attention to Steeves' family in Trumbull. In the next days, newspaper stories focused on their immediate reactions; and after that on the joyous reunion days later, when Steeves came home.

"Wife Refused to Let Hope Dwindle," declared the front-page headline in the *Reno Evening Gazette* on July 3, 1957. The story of Lt. Steeves dominated the upper half of the page. "I don't think a wife, deep down, ever really gives up hope," Mrs. Steeves was quoted as saying in an Associated Press story. A photo of the remarkably attractive Air Force wife, holding her daughter, ran next to one of her heavily bearded husband in his flight suit.

Elsewhere on the *Evening Gazette's* front page were indications of the mood of the times. A banner headline shouted: "U.S. May Share H-Bomb Data." And over the right-hand column another headline explained: "Advisors Suggest Providing Reds Fallout Prevention." According to the AP story, "President Eisenhower said today some advisers have told him Russia should be given the secret of how to make 'clean' hydrogen bombs - if the United States itself finally figures out how to do it." And a news item from "Nevada's Atomic Test Site" was placed inconspicuously in the middle left-hand column, under a *more important* story about a local rodeo, and over a *less important* one about a wind storm in the Midwest. Its small headline advised: "July 4 Atomic Test Postponed."

All in all, Lt. Steeves and his heroic story of survival -- one man with courage against the elements -- was surely an uplifting antidote for the unease of the times, when nuclear bombs rendered battlefield heroics and self-sacrifice meaningless, and perhaps unnecessary. And the previous year, Sloan Wilson's bestseller "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" was a hit movie, revolving around a WW-2 combat veteran (Gregory Peck) now a New York public relations man struggling to maintain his suburban family on the unsatisfying corporate treadmill.

Days after returning to Trumbull, Lt. Steeves made radio and TV appearances, including on the popular Art Linkletter, Dave Garaway, and Arthur Godfrey shows. Writing about a news conference in New York, a reporter observed that Lt. Steeves responded to every question "patiently, earnestly, and with good humor, giving every indication that he understood his incredible experience was something to be shared."

Parade magazine called the story of Lt. Steeves one of the year's "most inspiring." And in its story on Mrs. Steeves in early August, editors said she had a "message for the woman of America."

As for Lt. Steeves' future plans, his mother had summed them up when she described that wonderful phone call she got from her once-dead son. She asked if he was "going back to flying," according to a newspaper account.

"I sure am," he said.

"Oh, he loves it," she explained. "All the Air Force boys love it. He wanted to be a pilot since he was a child."

'McCarthy'-style Reporting

Then came the *Saturday Evening Post's* announcement in mid-August that it had withdrawn a \$10,000 offer for the lieutenant's exclusive story -- all after writer [Clay Blair Jr.](#), a noted military writer and former WW-2 submariner, claimed to have found many "discrepancies" in it.

Whether Blair came to his own conclusions, or got them on "background" from military contacts, is not known. But after getting a whiff of conflict and scandal, the media piled on. Never again was anything said by Steeves and his supporters taken at face value. Now, every story about him was injected with skepticism and innuendo, as the Air Force watched him twist in the wind.

By this time, the story of Lt. Steeves was a wire service story -- one being told by the Associated Press and several other wire services, which no longer exist. Most big metropolitan papers had written all they would about Lt. Steeves after a week.

Wire service reporting is highly competitive. Reporters must crank out a steady stream of copy for their clients - news-hungry newspapers and broadcast stations. And when perceiving a legitimate controversy or difference of opinion, they became impartial truth-seekers and referees, writing "balanced" stories that give equal weight to all viewpoints -- all so that the public can make up its *own* mind. Such a journalistic formula, together with a certain mindset, produces news that today's political conservatives criticize as reflecting a philosophy of "moral equivalence."

Above all, wire service reporters must put out attention-grabbing stories -- stories that get published. Often this involves putting "fresh angles" and interesting new *twists* on old stories.

And after the *Saturday Evening Post's* claims of "discrepancies," there were plenty of opportunities to do that. Now, Lt. Steeves was on the defensive: It was his word against the *Saturday Evening Post's*.

"AF Lieutenant Stands By Story; Magazine Doubts 54-Day Ordeal" blared the headline of an AP story in *The News* of Newport, Rhode Island, that ran August 15, 1957. The story continued in that vein, pitting Lt. Steeves' story against Clay Blair's. But ultimately, it was probably the story's controversial headline that readers remembered -- not remarks from Supt. Thomas J. Allen of Kings Canyon National Park. He was quoted as saying that rangers found evidence that Steeves had hiked some 25 miles through "very, very rough country."

By late summer, marital troubles were known to exist between Lt. Steeves and his wife, with papers reporting about Rita Steeves' plans to seek a divorce. No explanation was given, only that it had to do with problem's preceding Steeves' wilderness ordeal. But no matter. Connecting the dots, the headline of one wire service story declared: "Magazine Cancels Story, Wife Plans Divorce of Pilot." The innuendo had been created: Steeves was lying about his Sierra story -- and now his wife was walking out on him.

Rita Steeves from the start had been part of the Steeves-as-hero narrative. They were a very photogenic couple: Steeves cut a dashing figure in his beard; and he continued to wear it for a while, to his wife's dismay. Rita Steeves was often described, in the journalistic fashion of the day, as an "attractive blond" or "Steeves' blond wife."

One reporter even wrote of the "blond and beautiful" Rita Steeves, when describing her and the lively scene at New York's LaGuardia Field, as her husband disembarked a commercial flight and walked quickly into her arms. "Kiss him," shouted reporters and photographers, according the reporter's account. "Don't know where," she shouted, referring to the bushy beard.

She kissed him anyway.

Whether she wanted to be or not, Rita Steeves was drawn into the journalistic glare as it changed from the upbeat to the tawdry. "Wife of Pilot Who Survived in Wilds 'Mum,'" declared a headline. According to the wire story from Fairfield, Connecticut, "The wife of Air Force Lt. David A. Steeves, 23, who told tale of remarkable survival after an airplane crash, declined today to discuss his literary or marital troubles."

Connecting the dots, other stories played up the Steeves' marital troubles, while simultaneously casting doubt on Lt. Steeves' wilderness story. "Wife won't go back to 'lost' Airman," declared an AP story published December 27, 1957. The scare quotes around "lost," of course, suggested Lt. Steeves was never lost at all.

Yet another angle involved raising false suspicions about what the Air Force was calling a routine investigation. "Post Kills Story of Lost Airman/AF PROBE 'ROUTINE,'" declared one headline. Of course, words like "probe" along with those tiny but incriminating scare quotes around "routine" left little doubt that Lt. Steeves had some explaining to do. Referring to Blair's allegations of "discrepancies," the headline of an article by United Press, a wire service, asked: "True or False: Air Force Searches to Find Answers."

And so it went.

Soon enough, two of America's most influential magazines, *Time* and *Life*, joined the pile-on. "Certain Discrepancies" was the title of a condescending piece *Time* ran on August 26, 1957, written in the breezy pseudo-literary style invented by *Time's* Ivy League editors.

Suggesting Steeves was hiding something, it mentioned his marital troubles, subtly derided his survival story, and implied he was improperly cashing in on his fame. Portraying him as something of a cad, it concluded with a literary flourish:

"...Steeves waved emptily at the brand new grey (sic) Jaguar he bought shortly before his famed adventure. 'Look. I've lost everything in the world-my wife. What have I got with all this publicity? I've got a nice car. I'm lonesome as hell.'"

Life gave new meaning to the words "hatchet job" with a two-page spread published September 2, 1957: "The Strange Case of the Sierra Survivor; Pilot's tale of mountain ordeal arouses some strong suspicions."

Amplified with eleven photos and a map, its brief main story summed up previously published suspicions and innuendos -- and created some of its own. It noted that not "a trace" of Steeves' jet had been found. In addition, *Life* claimed Steeves' wife, "who is planning to divorce him for reasons that antedate this adventure, does not know what to believe."

Life published three different photos of Steeves -- including one of the nattily dressed pilot leaning against his prized Jaguar and smoking his pipe. The article raised a troubling issue: How could Steeves possibly afford the sports car on his meager Air Force pay? However, no response from Steeves was published; and there was no indication *Life* even asked for one. Readers were left to ponder the innuendo.

Another incriminating photo was taken near the ranger's cabin where Steeves stayed: It was a mug shot of a big deer with enormous antlers. In the photo, the seemingly calm animal stares blankly at the photographer as it stands just feet away. According to *Life*: Such "tame deer...easily approachable by man, raised suspicions of Steeves' claim he had to set up (an) elaborate trap to lure and kill deer."

Several grizzled locals were interviewed by *Life*, and they had their pictures published; all were all men in the 50s and 60s. A local sheriff elaborated on how the Air Force pilot might have indeed staged a hoax. And *Life* interviewed Supt. Thomas Allen, of Kings Canyon National Park. Months earlier, he'd told the AP about evidence of Steeves' heroic wilderness ordeal. But *Life* put a different spin on those remarks, saying Allen thought the escape "was extremely difficult but possible."

Redbook's January article, however, rose above such inane pack journalism. Peters, the author, a WW-2 pilot who'd been shot down, observed that "what had been for more than a month the heroic story of a pilot's winning battle against the Sierra became, overnight, a front-page story of a possible hoax." He quoted Steeves as saying that "to be the subject of hero worship for having saved my own skin was strange enough, but to lose everything I loved -- my wife and child -- and then be thought a liar...well it was rough."

Most significantly, the article provided the first comprehensive account of Steeves' wilderness ordeal (the story the *Saturday Evening Post* turned down); and it explained some of the "discrepancies" the magazine had alleged. Peters also took the trouble to interview Steeves' commanding officer at Craig Air Force Base in Alabama, Col. Leo F. Dusard Jr. A decorated WW-2 pilot, he was quoted as saying: "All office of security investigation reports are classified. I cannot reveal the content of this one."

"As for my personal opinion, I do not doubt Lt. Steeves' integrity. I believe he bailed out of his plane where he said he bailed out. I accept his statement as to the explosion (which prompted him to parachute). "I believe Steeves was in the mountains for 54 days, survived and walked out, and I consider it a remarkable feat." Reacting to the *Redbook* piece, several newspapers across the country ran stories about it - writing their own pieces for a change, rather than letting the wires do the work. But some still gravitated toward the sensational. A piece the *Modesto Bee* ran on December 27, 1957, played up Lt. Steeves' romantic life -- and Col. Dusard's comments were cited in the last few paragraphs. Similarly, the front-page headline in the *Big Spring Daily Herald* (Texas) on December 31, 1957 announced: "Steeves Tells of Love Life in Current Magazine Article."

Redbook was not stooping to tabloid journalism to discuss such things. By now, details of the Steeves' private life had become relevant in light of wire service stories that had for months implied a connection between Steeves' wilderness ordeal and his marital troubles.

Even as *Redbook's* article appeared, the wire services were still cranking out copy about Lt. Steeves. Two items ran on the "jump page" of the *Modesto Bee's Redbook* piece. "Wife Sees No Chance of Future Together," declared a headline. Another announced: "Steeves Plans to Sue Magazine On Lost Contract." Steeves ended up winning that legal action, apparently recovering the \$10,000 he'd been promised for his exclusive story.

Along with its *Redbook* piece, the *Reno Evening Gazette* on December 26, 1957 published a wire service item: "Steeves Released By US Air Force." According to the AP story, Steeves had "been returned to civilian life at his own request." Citing an Air Force spokesman, the article said the Air Force "is under orders to trim its active officer rolls by about 2,500 during the year ending June 30. The spokesman cited this circumstance and said acceptance of requests like Steeves' is routine."

Steeves remained in the reserves, however. The news item quoted an unnamed "former associate" of Steeves' as saying the lieutenant's resignation may have had something to do with a "reconciliation" he'd had with his wife.

Before it was published, Steeves was shown the *Redbook* article, which portrayed his complicated personal life in a negative light. He was quoted as saying, "If Mr. Peters has been harsh with me as a human being, he has also been fair. He has told the truth."

A year and a half later, Rita Steeves was granted a divorce -- though not before suffering the indignity of having private details of her marriage detailed in local papers. She later married an accountant. Today, the phone number listed assigned to her name in Connecticut is unlisted.

Steeves eventually remarried, but the scandal that enveloped him haunted him until his death. Indeed, a former airman in the squadron that searched for Steeves said in a 1997 interview: "(W)e heard that he faked the whole thing. If he'd have walked into our squad, we'd have killed him." *Redbook*, with its limited circulation, could not restore Steeves' reputation.

In defending himself against skeptics in 1957, Steeves always faced a major hurdle. No trace of his jet was found -- not until 20 years later in 1977. Boy Scouts hiking in Kings Canyon National Park came across an airplane's bubble canopy: Its serial number showed it had come off Steeves' T-33. AP put out a story, but not many papers ran it. A bittersweet headline ran in *Pacific Stars & Strips*: "Discovery Backs Story of Disgraced Pilot of '50s."

The discovery was of no help to Steeves. Twelve years earlier, he and a passenger were killed in Idaho during a take-off mishap involving a light plane, reportedly a Stinson Mule. Then 31, Steeves reportedly had modified the single-engine plane and was demonstrating it to his passenger. At the time, he owned an aviation firm in Fresno, California. He had remarried, and with his new wife had two children, a daughter and son born ten days

earlier. According to some sources, Steeves had rented planes over the years and gone out to look for his lost jet.

'Kangaroo Court'

In their reporting, the wire services fancied themselves to be producing balanced stories on Lt. Steeves. It was their job to tell the truth, and let the public decide, based on an even-handed presentation of all viewpoints. But in the case of Lt. David Steeves, the court of public opinion was Kangaroo Court, a court so named because of the "leaps and bounds" it takes in coming to a guilty verdict.

Interestingly, Steeves was not the first Air Force officer to be enveloped in scandal in the 1950s. In 1953, Lt. Milo Radulovich was discharged from the Air Force after being deemed a security risk for his alleged communist ties. Liberals rushed to his defense, with legendary CBS newsman Edward R. Murrow his most visible defender. Murrow's efforts were portrayed in the 2005 movie about the newsman, *Good Night, and Good Luck*.

For self-congratulatory journalists, the defense of Lt. Milo Radulovich was considered one of journalism's finest hours. An innocent man was saved -- and the country was saved from McCarthyism. Yet curiously, no such journalistic crusade came to the support of Lt. Steeves. Neither Murrow nor anybody of his stature came forward to evoke the most famous line attacking Wisconsin's irresponsible senator: "Have you no decency, sir?"

Perhaps Lt. Steeves would have been a more interesting and sympathetic figure if he'd been accused of harboring communist sympathies and had some complicated ethnic background. But, alas, he was merely a 23-year-old Air Force pilot eager to grab his piece of the American dream -- earn a good living and move his family out of the trailer homes and garage apartments they'd been living on his Air Force salary. And he wanted as well to enjoy his prized Jaguar sports car that, to the outrage of *Life's* editors, he apparently could not afford.

'Possible Causes'

The media played a major role in the public humiliation of Lt. Steeves. But the Air Force played a role too. In newspaper articles, Air Force spokesmen were quoted as saying there was no reason to believe that Steeves "was a phony." But the Air Force undertook no pro-active effort to defend him, and a look at the Air Force's accident report makes it clear why.

Recently, this author obtained some 50 pages of the 1957 report from Kirtland Air Force Base in New Mexico. No testimony or statements are included, which is reflected in scores of missing pages. There's page after page of mostly dry technical details, which include a number of blacked out sentences and spaces -- from Lt. Steeves' year of birth to potentially interesting remarks here and there.

Lacking a wrecked airplane, investigators obviously had a tough time reaching a conclusion; and so the accident's cause was undetermined. Or as the board stated: It was "able to come to no conclusion as to the probable causes of the accident."

Yet three "possible causes" were listed, and the first was tantalizing. Contradicting the Air Force's official and public positions, the No. 1 possible cause stated, "That Lt. Steeves perpetrated a disappearance and ejected from a normally functioning aircraft."

That's a bombshell on several fronts. First, Lt. Steeves was *never* charged with anything; the Air Force publicly maintained he was cleared in a routine investigation. He supposedly resigned voluntarily, then remained in the reserves.

Yet *some* Air Force brass privately doubted him all along. Their doubts never made it into news reports, to be sure; not officially anyway. But they certainly could have been talking privately with reporters, giving "background only" interviews that politely suggested how to spin the story of Lt. Steeves and his missing T-33.

How the accident board reached this "hoaxer" conclusion cannot be known for sure. Under the Air Force's usual guidelines, all statements and testimony were stricken from the material made public. But those familiar with the case contend Lt. Steeves *never* would have come under such suspicion if his T-33 had been found. "If they had found the wreck, they would have know it was *not* a hoax, because the whole case of it being a hoax was they thought he had sold it to the Russians," observed Allen J. Schuh, 67, a retired psychology professor at California State University (Hayward), who taught in the School of Business and Economics. For years, Schuh has been piecing together the puzzle of Lt. Steeves and his missing T-33, a case that has fascinated him since he was a boy.

"I always felt he (Lt. Steeves) suffered a terrible injustice," he said, during a telephone interview.

A Proper Search?

While suggesting that Lt. Steeves absconded with his jet, Air Force brass overlooked an interesting detail: It appears that only a half-hearted effort was made to find Lt. Steeves and his downed jet. In its "mission statement," the 41st Air Rescue Squadron admits that rescue units failed to search promising areas -- where the jet might have crashed -- due to low clouds, fog, and treacherous terrain. There's no indication rescue units later visited these areas, once the weather cleared up.

One excuse after another is mentioned in the mission report of June 6, 1957. "Extended area search commended at daylight on 10 May by all participants in the mission. Weather left much to be desired," it stated. Elsewhere, it noted:

"On several days during this mission, it was impossible to dispatch any aircraft because of weather. Ground parties were sent to at these times, but their efforts were often nullified to inability to negotiate the mountainous terrain under the weather conditions which prevailed."

Most incredibly, the statement admitted no visits were made to two sites where aircraft wreckage was spotted -- wreckage that was "not in the Air Rescue Squadron Crash Locator Index. Ground parties were dispatched to check both of this leads, but they were unsuccessful due whether which at times limited visibility to 25 feet in fog, rain and snow."

Eventually, Lt. Steeves was declared dead.

The Air Force briefly faced some pointed questions about the hasty issuance of a death certificate, after Lt. Steeves turned out to be very much alive. Responding to a reporter, a Pentagon spokesman said a death certificate was issued only after "a thorough search was made and no trace was found of the pilot."

Apparently, Lt. Steeves father had his doubts about the Air Force's search effort, a point he mentioned when telling a newspaper reporter about the phone call from his once-dead son. When Lt. Steeves asked if he'd been given up for dead, his father replied: "I told him 'no'. I said I was just getting ready to come out to see if I could do something."

"The accident board and 41st Air Rescue Squadron didn't do their jobs," Schuh says.

The 'Hoaxer' Narrative

The discovery of the jet's bubble canopy in 1977 was the final *coup de grace* for conspiracy theorists, both in the Air Force and news media. They destroyed a man's reputation, yet none of them ever answered a simple question: What did the young lieutenant hope to achieve?

Even back in 1957, there were obvious holes in the narrative casting Lt. Steeves as a hoaxer. For one thing, he never took along a survival kit, which suggested he anticipated a routine flight. And when ejecting over some of America's roughest terrain, he carried only a .32 caliber handgun and knife. Left in the cockpit were a Bible (New Testament) and can of pipe tobacco.

That he never planned a trip lasting 54 days also is underscored by the precarious state in which he left his personal life, as *Redbook* revealed. He'd fessed up to his wife about an affair he'd been having a woman in San Francisco, and promised to end it. His wife expected him to do it, before his ill-fated training flight from San Francisco back home to Craig Air Force Base near Selma.

However, he failed to keep his promise, as his wife fortuitously learned during during his wilderness adventure. While he was munching on grass snacks and raw deer meat, the "other woman" contracted his wife. Very quickly, she realized the shocking truth: Her husband had *not* ended the relationship. "After that, I couldn't even cry. I felt robbed even of a widow's natural grief," she told *Redbook*.

Somehow, Lt. Steeves patched things up -- but only for a while. The couple would have an on-and-off again relationship, making for entertaining wire service copy and helping to nourish conspiracy theories.

Other Possible Causes

According to the accident board, the second "possible cause" of the jet crash was,

"That an explosive decompression occurred, filling the cockpit with vapor, and the pilot panicked and ejected as a result of believing that the explosive decompression was an explosion and the vapor was smoke."

If that indeed happened, Lt. Steeves would certainly not be the first military pilot to eject prematurely from an airplane in an emergency. However, he would be the first military pilot to suffer nationwide humiliation for such an error.

Readers who are pilots will find it interesting that Lt. Steeves had logged a total of 922 flight hours, including 540 in the T-33; and within the last 90 days he'd logged 87 hours. One newspaper described him as a "rookie" pilot, yet he was doing quite a lot of flying during an Air Force career after graduating from a college in Connecticut, where he attended ROTC. With all those hours, he must have felt confident as he leveled off at 33,500 feet on the day of his ill-fated flight. How likely is it that a well-trained and level-headed pilot would eject in a "panic" over mountainous terrain -- unless he had very good reason to believe his jet was uncontrollable, in flames, or breaking up?

When discussing the pilot's temperament, his father described a son who was resourceful, deliberative in his thinking, and "afraid of nothing or nobody." He also was in good physical shape. If he safely ejected, his father had figured he had a "50-50" chance of survival.

Aviation Mystery Solved?

Lastly, there is "possible cause" No. 3: "That a combustion explosion did occur and disabled the aircraft."

Curiously, there is no elaboration; and below the statement are blacked out sentences. Presumably, this is the possible cause to which investigators attached the least weight. Yet today this is the cause that's most widely accepted among those familiar with the accident report, according to Schuh, the professor.

Through a Freedom of Information (FOI) request, the 1960's Navy veteran obtained a more complete accident report than this author obtained directly from Kirtland. Recently, he published a fascinating [analysis](#) about the jet's final moments in *The Forensic Examiner*, a professional journal.

Not only does Schuh provide a new twist on the jet's final moments, he pinpoints its probable location. During certain times of the year, he says, he's even obtained Google satellite images of a straight-wing jet among the rocks and bush, not far from where Boy Scouts found its bubble canopy.

What triggered the explosion?

According to his article, the jet had a history of " maintenance problems" so problematic that the U.S. Navy, which had flown it previously, stopped using it. One problem was that the "aircraft's fuel cap, which was behind the (back) ejection seat, occasionally leaked."

The smell of jet fuel in the cockpit, however, would not have been noticed by Lt. Steeves: He was breathing through his oxygen mask. This would have been standard operating procedure, and Schuh's article noted the lieutenant was regarded as a good pilot. This is contrary to *Life* magazine's article in September 1959, which described him as merely "average" -- a claim that failed to cite any sources.

Most who read the accident report believe a spark from an electrical source ignited the fuel-air mixture. It ripped through the cockpit, knocking Lt. Steeves unconscious, and burning part of his parachute. He said he quickly came to, and ejected upon finding "the flight surfaces and controls had been fatally damaged."

In his article, however, Schuh recasts this scenario with some intriguing twists. Drawing on information from the accident report, he contends that Lt. Steeves touched off the explosion when he set his autopilot. In Schuh's account, though, things happen slightly differently after that.

Lt. Steeves did not black out for seconds, but for minutes -- and perhaps for a number of minutes. Waking up, he suddenly found himself in a smoke-filled cockpit and seemingly life-or-death situation. Schuh wrote: "He said the aircraft was spinning, but perhaps his head was spinning and the aircraft was still flying straight and level." Lt. Steeves began fighting the controls -- forgetting he'd just set the autopilot - but the controls seemed unresponsive to him, explained.

So he ejected.

Yet the jet's controls were in fact "not damaged...there was nothing wrong with the flight surfaces," Schuh explained; and while the jet flew off on autopilot, it did not maintain its programmed course. Lacking a canopy, pilot, and ejection seat, it now possessed different flight characteristics.

When the explosion occurred, moreover, Schuh thinks Lt. Steeves had his hand on the rudder trim tab. This "could have caused his hand to put in too much left rudder (input) as he was knocked unconscious." As a result, the jet went into a wide left turn.

Interestingly, Schuh's article notes that Lt. Steeves did not report seeing his jet while descending under his parachute. He neither saw it crash into the ground or a lake, suggesting it did indeed fly off on its own.

Believing the unmanned jet entered a wide left turn after Lt. Steeves ejected, Schuh wrote: "By calculation, this turn would have a diameter of about 70 miles and could take him in a loop from his initial south heading, first east and then north, eventually over Kings Canyon," he wrote. "The aircraft continued the wide circle until fuel exhaustion."

Schuh, speaking on the phone, also held out the possibility that a spark from another source ignited the fuel-air mixture; and he said the T-33 could have flown off in stable configuration without its autopilot being engaged.

With this hypothesis, Schuh set out to pinpoint the jet's location. He established points on a map that included Lt. Steeves' landing spot near Lake Helen; his last radio transmission; and its bubble canopy that Boy Scouts discovered.

The T-33, he concluded, rests at a site where rescue units spotted wreckage, yet never checked due to poor weather and difficult terrain. Elaborating on the thinking of rescue personnel, Schuh's article note this site was "far east of Steeves' expected flight path, with no indication of recent fire or explosion or the presence of a sign of life." It was presumed to be another of the many wrecks dotting the mountainous. A Google image he took, however, showed what appears to be the missing T-33.

He forwarded the photo to Air Force officials, telling them: "'You've got a straight-wing jet down on the rock.'"

"All they responded was that it made sense," he said.

Even after 50 years, Schuh said the case of Lt. Steeves is an embarrassment to the Air Force. "I think the Air Force would rather have the whole thing just go away," he said.

That Lt. Steeves was cast as a possible hoaxster by the accident board probably occurred because of what Schuh described as a certain military mindset: Once a determined senior officer makes up his mind, lower-ranking ones tend to follow along. Faced with a lost jet, Schuh said "it became easy to blame a junior officers, and to accuse him of a hoax."

Schuh fine-tuned the Air Force's coordinates for the aircraft wreck that air rescue units never checked out, and that may well be the missing T-33's resting place. It's located in Kings Canyon at these coordinates: 36.2333N...118.6833W.

"If I was 20 years younger, I would have gone there last summer," Schuh said. The site is not far from a campground. Had he gone, he says, he would have looked for the tail number of Lt. Steeves missing T-33: 52-9232A. Verifying that, he knows what he'd have found in the cockpit of the long-dead pilot who "suffered a terrible travesty" -- his can of pipe tobacco and a New Testament Bible.

POSTSCRIPT: The Crash Site

Allen J. Schuh explained in an e-mail message how to find the site where Lt. Steeves' T-33A might be found:

"From the mission report of the 41st Air Rescue Squadron, as mentioned in the accident report, I got 36 14 N...118 41 W which was converted by one of the Internet photograph viewers to be 36.2333N...118.6833W.

"I looked at a few of the Internet viewers and realized rather quickly that if you input those coordinates you don't always get the same picture. So I looked for a feature and found Frasier Mill Campground on TopoZone (a satellite image website) to get a look at the topology. Hedrick Pond Campground is Southeast. Draw a line between the two and look very carefully about half way between. Follow the 6400 grid line.

"I saw an anomaly, printed it, and asked my wife what it looked like. She independently thought it was a straight-winged jet with drop tanks attached. This was with nothing sophisticated optically, just the viewer on the PC. I wondered if I could get better pictures historically before and after May 1957 but stopped when I thought I had enough. There is no substitute for the check on the ground. You are looking for tail number 52-9232A."

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