



(News Illustration by Betty Sheinis)

**MILES FROM NOWHERE** — Air Force Lt. David Steeves crashed in his jet over California 25 years ago. For the next two

months, he was out of touch with civilization. When he finally pulled himself out of the wilderness, officials couldn't find his jet leaving the world to doubt his tale of survival.

# Nobody believed the pilot

By **BOB RIEL**

United Press International

**NORTH SMITHFIELD, R.I.** — When the late Air Force Lt. David Steeves emerged from the wilderness to become the subject of a national controversy in 1957, he touched the heart of a man he never met.

Now, Daniel Sadwin is trying to repay the debt by asking the Air Force to honor Steeves posthumously.

Although most people have forgotten Steeves' story, Sadwin, 62, of North Smithfield, remembers it well. He believes the tale is a tragic one that needs to be told again.

A Connecticut native, Steeves was a 23-year-old first lieutenant in the Air Force when he was asked to complete a routine mission on May 9, 1957. His orders called for him to fly a T-33 jet plane from Oakland, Calif., to Craig Air Force Base in Selma. Steeves was stationed in Selma, where he lived with his

wife, Rita, and daughter, Leisa.

The young pilot was cruising effortlessly above the clouds, three miles south of Fresno, Calif., when there was an explosion in the plane. Slightly dazed and with smoke filling the cockpit, Steeves ejected.

He landed on a snowy peak in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Both ankles were badly sprained and Steeves was left with two boxes of matches, a small butcher knife, a loaded .32 revolver and four extra bullets.

He wrapped himself in his parachute for warmth and spent the next three days in a makeshift cave constructed from ice and

snow, waiting for the pain in his legs to subside.

When he finally set off in search of food and shelter, he left the heavy parachute behind. For days he limped along, eating nothing but snow, before finding a deserted ranger station.

Here, Steeves survived for more than a month. He finished a leftover box containing mostly canned goods. Later, he used a hook to catch fish in a nearby stream and even bagged a deer by constructing a homemade trap with his revolver.

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# Rescuing pilot's image

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But help never came.

In desperation, he lit a forest fire in the hope that he'd be discovered. Again, he had no luck.

In mid-June, Steeves decided he had to find help. Taking enough food for about two days, he set out in search of a clearing that was marked on a map.

He met campers along the way who were opening the trail for the summer. The next morning, one of the men took him to a nearby settlement, where he called his parents and wife, all of whom assumed him to be dead.

Almost immediately, word of Steeves' amazing feat was splashed across the front pages of major newspapers. Magazines and book publishers began bidding for his story.

But the praise was not to last.

Despite exhaustive ground and air searches, the wreckage of Steeves' plane could not be found. His story was questioned. The matter was complicated when he claimed to have no knowledge of the forest fire, only to later admit starting it.

The Saturday Evening Post canceled a \$10,000 contract for his story. Other magazines questioned his honesty. Some Air Force officials admitted to having doubts. Some observers theorized that Steeves had sold his plane to a foreign government.

The circle was complete. In a matter of weeks, Steeves plummeted from national hero status to having his story questioned. His wife divorced him, citing marital problems that began before the ordeal. At his request, the Air Force took him off active duty.

Steeves remarried, settled in Fresno and operated a small aviation company. During the next several years, he spent as much time as possible flying and hiking over the route where his saga began, hoping to prove his innocence. He was never able to find the wreck.

Then, in October 1965, Steeves died when a light cargo plane he was operating crashed at Boise, Idaho. He was 31.

Sadwin came across Steeves' story in a December 1957 issue of Redbook magazine. He never forgot the story and was startled to open the newspaper Oct. 14, 1978 and see a story about Steeves.

A group of Boy Scouts hiking in the mountains had stumbled onto the cockpit cover of an old jet and a check of the serial numbers showed it was from Steeves' plane. Other parts of the plane were found in the area.

Steeves finally was vindicated, 21 years after the incident.

*(Bob Riel is on the staff of the Woonsocket Call in Rhode Island)*