THE BIG CARNIVAL

January 2, 2008

After 50 Years: An Air Force Pilot's Bravery Outshines His Public Humiliation

(*This was originally published at The American Thinker. For more on the case of Lt. David Steeves, see another post at this website: "Shooting Star: The Last Flight of Lt. David Steeves."*)

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.

Lt. 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 perhaps 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 all of 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. I had to start a new life,” she related. 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, Lt. 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 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*, the woman's magazine.

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, Lt. Steeves said he didn't consider himself deeply religious, though 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'

Lt. Steeves came upon four 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 the call from her once-dead son, his mother told reporters that he'd “felt every prayer” said for him. His wife Rita, no longer a window, was too “incoherent with joy” to make much sense according to a reporter who tried to interview her. 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 Lt. 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 the young pilot 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 infant 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, quieter headline explained: “Advisers 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, below a *more important* story about a local rodeo, and above 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 seemed to render 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 suburban family man and public relations executive 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 from her once-dead son. She asked him if he'd be “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 associate editor 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 Lt. 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 that 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 seemingly legitimate controversy or difference of opinion, they fancy themselves as being 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 angels” 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' word 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 Lt. 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 her husband's 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: Lt. 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 a 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 parenthesis 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 parenthesis 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, stated: “True or False: Air Force Searches to Find Answers.”

And so it went.

Soon enough, two of America's most influential news 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 Lt. Steeves was hiding something, it mentioned his marital troubles, subtly derided his survival story, and implied he was improperly cashing in on his fame.

It concluded with a literary flourish that portrayed him as something of a cad:

> “...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 word “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.” Amply illustrated 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 Lt. Steeves' jet had been found. In addition, *Life* claimed the pilot's 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 Lt. Steeves -- including one of the nattily dressed pilot leaning against his prized Jaguar sports car, and smoking his pipe. The article raised a troubling issue: How could Lt. Steeves possibly afford the car on his meager Air Force pay? However, no response from the pilot 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 Lt. 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, playing up revelations of Lt. Steeves' marital infidelity. 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 wining 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.”

Lt. 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 described in local papers. She later married an accountant. Today, a phone number listed under 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. Some 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 & Stripes*: “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 a son who was born ten days earlier. According to some accounts, 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” in reasoning it takes in coming to a guilty verdict.

Interestingly, Lt. 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 sense of 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 in on his Air Force salary. And he wanted as well to enjoy his prized Jaguar 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 way.

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.”

No media outlet appears to have ever reported that; it appears a Freedom of Information request for the accident report was only made recently. Yet it'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 commenced at daylight on 10 May by all participants in the mission. Weather left much to be desired.”

“On several days during this mission, it was impossible to dispatch any aircraft because of weather," it noted, elsewhere. "Ground parties were sent out at

these times, but their efforts were often nullified due 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 Locater Index. Ground parties were dispatched to check both of these leads, but they were unsuccessful due to weather 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. Before his ill-fated flight, he'd fessed up to his wife that he'd been having an affair with a San Francisco woman, and he promised to end it. His wife had expected him to do that before his jet vanished on a training flight, en route from San Francisco to Craig Air Force Base near Selma, his home base. But while Lt. Steeves was in the wilderness, munching on grass snacks and raw deer meat, the "other woman" contracted his wife. Very quickly, she realized her husband had not ended the affair. She told *Redbook*, "After that, I couldn't even cry. I felt robbed even of a widow's natural grief."

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 his 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," according to a newspaper account. He also was in good physical shape. If he safety 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 retired professor.

Through a Freedom of Information request, the 1960's Navy veteran obtained a more complete accident report than this author obtained directly from Kirtland Air Force Base. Recently, he published a fascinating (<a href="http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G1-165192831.html">) 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 what he thinks may be 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 1957, 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-filed 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, his article 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 it's 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 unconsciousness.” 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.

Convinced 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 some 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 he thinks may 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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Posted by David Paulin at 1/02/2008 02:18:00 AM

David Paulin
United States
I'm a journalist and was a Caracas-based foreign correspondent during the years Hugo Chávez came to power. I've also reported from the Caribbean, including from Jamaica and Cuba. In the U.S. I've worked for a television network and as a newspaper reporter and aviation journalist; I'm a pilot and have a commercial license and instrument rating. Politically, I'm one of those former Democrats who got mugged by reality. I named this blog after my favorite movie on journalism ethics – a Billy Wilder film that flopped.