Pacific typhoons and have roller-coasted over Alaska in brittle Beavers. And I have never once been airsick. But I’m glad I took her advice, because the pilot of our turbo-charged Cessna 182, Ryan’s husband Ron, 76, has just made his umpteenth turn 1,000 feet above a cluster of mangy hills that look like crumpled paper grocery bags, and despite my patch, I’m beginning to feel woozy.

Since taking off 45 minutes earlier from Reno-Tahoe International Airport, we’ve been flying a corkscrew pattern—technically called a “contour search”—slowly descending in 500-foot increments. Thus far, Ron has spent a total of 24 hours in the air looking for Fossett. Now, he’s wrestling the yoke to keep sadistic updrafts from kicking our single-engine airplane’s butt.

Shortly after Fossett, 63, disappeared in his Bellanca Citabria Super Decathlon, journalists were banned from CAP aircraft involved in the search. “There simply would be no way for us to accommodate everyone,” says Cynthia Ryan. Reporters were drawn by the mysterious disappearance of a wealthy businessman and aviation celebrity—Fossett had made the first solo, nonstop flight around the world in a balloon; the first solo, nonstop, unrefueled flight around the world in an airplane; and the longest-distance flight of any aircraft in history. He had set a total of 93 aviation world records, and was also an accomplished sailor and mountain climber.

What brought down a seasoned pilot like Steve Fossett? Whatever happened, the Civil Air Patrol had to calculate everywhere he could be and divide all that land into searchable sectors. Volunteers then overflew mile after hard-to-read mile.

What brought down a seasoned pilot like Steve Fossett? Whatever happened, the Civil Air Patrol had to calculate everywhere he could be and divide all that land into searchable sectors. Volunteers then overflew mile after hard-to-read mile.
The CAP’s Nevada wing set up search headquarters at the Minden airport. Many of the volunteers are retired pilots. Top: John Morgan, who knew Fossett and calls him part of “the brotherhood” of aviators, searches over Minden on Day 10. Two or three passes over the same swath to attain what they say is a 99 percent “probability of detection,” or POD. Rounding out this effort are my amateur eyeballs (in all likelihood the very last CAP-authorized pair to look for Fossett; the force would stop flights the following day, and suspend the search on October 2). I’m not expecting much luck. The failure to find Fossett has many speculating on his intent when he took off at 8:45 that morning. It was initially reported that he was scouting for terrain where he could attempt a forced landing. Fossett himself was probably right: He had already found a site. His wife said that he had intended to enjoy a pleasure ride over the Sierra Nevada mountains, then return for lunch. But what if Fossett had decided to fly one way to some destination? It could mean that there were hundreds and hundreds of miles of land and ocean that had never been searched at all, and needed to be.

AIRPLANES GO MISSING almost daily throughout the country, so you can bet that at any given moment a CAP crew is airborne somewhere. The CAP also helps with immigration enforcement, homeland security operations, drug busts, disaster relief, and ferrying organs for transplants. On 9/11, it was a CAP pilot who snapped the first aerial images of the World Trade Center site.

The Civil Air Patrol was formally established on December 1, 1941, at the behest of Gill Robb Wilson, an aviator and strident proponent of military preparedness. Wilson urged the formation of a civilian air fleet to assist with military operations: Six days later, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor (nicely timing, Wilson), and the CAP set to work. The volunteers supplied their own aircraft, popular ones included Fairchild 24s, Piper Jss and J4s, and Stinson 10As. In World War II, spotters in CAP aircraft painted red and yellow little red-and-yellow planes,” scowled Derks, an officer for the Nevada Department of Public Safety. Derks is a big, portly man with a gentle voice who hates to fly. He’s the chief lawman in charge of the Fossett operation, and has been coordinating the efforts of the CAP, National Guard, Navy, and state authorities.

When an airplane goes missing, the initial call from a worried friend or family member typically goes to the FAA, the local police, or an airport flight service (the one at the Reno-Tahoe airport got the call about Fossett at 1:10 p.m., about five and a half hours after he’d departed, from an unidentified family member). If the airplane disappears in Nevada, the next call is to Derks. “We start by doing aerial checks,” he says. Alerts go out to every airport in range of the missing flight to see if the pilot landed and simply forgot to tell anyone he arrived. If that fails, Derks notifies the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center. The center directs all overland search and rescue operations in the Lower 48, Mexico and Canada. When aerial checks turned up nothing after Fossett was reported missing, Derks met with AFRC brass to hash out the next step.
It was nighttime, and there was a possibility of him being trapped in one of the canyons,” Derks recalls. “They’re narrow and steep and it’s tough to see anything.”

The coordination center asked the Nevada Air National Guard to conduct a preliminary search with its night-vision goggles. When that proved unsuccessful, Derks and the center sounded the alarm to mobilize nearby CAP volunteers.

Nevada’s CAP ranks include an artist, construction worker, stockbroker, firefighter, realtor, civil engineer, dentist, and lumber salesman. The director of operations for the CAP Nevada Wing is Tim Hahn, a 52-year-old aircraft mechanic and former police lieutenant who had worked on homicides and sex crimes.

Hahn has a shaved head and goes by the nickname Kojak. He remembers the first meeting of the CAP volunteers at the command center at the Minden airport, and how daunting the challenges seemed. “Fossett took off in an airplane with four hours of gas,” he says. “His aircraft could do about 120 knots—nautical miles per hour. The ceiling was a circle with a radius of either 240 or 260 nautical miles (assuming Fossett had been making a round trip) or 480 (if he’d intended to fly one way toward some destination). In other words,” Hahn says, “where do we start?”

At Minden headquarters the walls are covered with aeronautical sections—big topographic maps. On one, crosshairs mark the Flying M Ranch, ringed by concentric circles that indicate the potential ranges of Fossett’s journey.

(Rather than a high-probability search area, such as the 5,700-foot-long airstrip at the Hilton ranch, he aimed instead to the sectors, then keep a tally on which had been searched."

We have stopped here at Minden before our search flight to attend the daily briefing and prepare our flight plan. Uniformed CAP pilots hunch over maps, and the radio in the communications room is cackling with chatter. I meet Betty Smith, a lanky, fast-talking retired geography professor who warns she’ll have to wring my neck if I print her age. Officially an “incident commander,” her CAP duties for the Nevada Wing include overseeing search operations and directing aerospace education.

The maps on the wall are divided into a grid, with each sector encompassing 293 square miles, one of Smith’s primary jobs is to assign pilot-scanner teams to the sectors, then keep a tally on which have been flown when and by whom. Each time a sector is searched, it’s marked with a purple square. The area running north-south along the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada range is jammed with purple squares. “This is a region where a small aircraft would encounter very high winds,” notes Smith.

Pilot Bill Schroeder, 61, who has just arrived for the morning briefing, says the winds barreling across the Sierras can be deadly to small aircraft and are responsible for the majority of crashes in mountain flying. He tells me that even expert pilots can easily fall victim to the nasty Sierra winds. “The Sierras are an abrupt outcropping straight out of the ground,” he says. “Four miles from Minden they rise 12,000 feet. On the western side of the Sierra, the air follows the slope upward. But as soon as the mountains crest, the air tumbles over the leeward side into Nevada; think of a river flowing over a big rock and then spilling down the backsode like a waterfall.”

Still, flying over this terrain, you can understand how a wreck might be lying right under your nose but go unnoticed for decades. “People think Nevada is a big flat desert, but it’s the most mountainous state in the U.S.,” says Schroeder, because those hills slope more gradually, or in the Rockies, where the difference in elevation between the points of takeoff and the Continental Divide is much less. “But here the wind is forced to rise rapidly and can accelerate to well over 130 miles per hour, creating severe downdrafts on the lee side.”

Even expert pilots can fall victim to nasty Sierra winds. “The Sierras are an abrupt outcropping,” says Bill Schroeder. “They rise 12,000 feet. On the western side, the air follows the slope upward. But as soon as the mountains crest, the air tumbles over the leeward side into Nevada. Think of a river flowing over a big rock and then spilling down the backsode like a waterfall.”

Russ Johnson, a 68-year-old retired Air Force pilot, Johnson, a no nonsense man of few words, isn’t entirely enthralled with Fossett’s exploits, like his recent interest in setting a land speed record. “I’m not so sure about a guy’s judgment when he wants to do 700 miles per hour in his car,” he says. Johnson was a forward air controller in Vietnam, a deceptively modest job title for someone who skimmed above the dense jungle in a Cessna, deliberately drawing Viet Cong fire to flush out enemies ahead of advancing U.S. troops. “I have quite a bit of experience looking for stuff on the ground,” Johnson tells me. The skill makes him an exceptional CAP scanner: able to remain hyper-focused on mercilessly monotonous terrain as it

In this terrain, even a Boeing 747 could disappear.

Think I’m exaggerating? Consider this: United Airlines lets passengers eavesdrop on the pilots’ communications with air traffic control. On my flight into Reno, as the Airbus A320 descended, I heard a controller repeatedly ask our pilot to switch on his transponder— a radar transmitter that conveys aircraft identity and location—and the pilot kept insisting it was “operational and working normally.” After some back and forth, the voice on the ground finally conceded that the terrain must be blocking the signal. That may explain why pings from Fossett’s ELT were never heard.

Riding shotgun on my CAP flight is
zips past at 125 mph, while enduring short bursts of overwhelming visual dis-
traction and stress. During his 33.2 hours of flight time searching for Fossett, Johnson spotted two of those six earlier wreck sites and
noted their locations. On this flight, he has decided to show me one of them. He enters the coordinates of one in our Cessna’s GPS unit.

We’re in a new airplane, built in 2006, with a belly-mounted camera linked to a
telephone transmitter, a setup that lets the crew take photos of the ground and send them anywhere in the world instant-
ly. Additionally, the Cessna is equipped with a Garmin G1000 “glass cockpit”: The instruments are displayed digital-
ly on dual LCD screens in front of the pilot and copilot. The GPS unit is inte-
grated into the glass display, and our route to the wreckage is highlighted in yel-
low. Johnson pushes a toggle button next to the screen, switching to a “fly through” mode that renders the terrain in three dimensions. The mountains are color-coded, and anything that’s higher than our current elevation is red. At the moment, we’re flying through a crim-
son area.

Only a few Cessnas in the CAP’s na-
tionwide fleet have this fancy naviga-
tion and imaging technology. But the CAP also has 16 Gipsyland Airvans, each with an imaging system called ARCHER (Airborne Real-time Cuing Hyperspec-
tral Enhanced Reconnaissance). ARCHER’s prowess is its ability to take a snapshot of an object’s color and heat emissions, then compare the data with debris on the ground to try to spot an identical ob-
ject there. For this search, ARCHER was programmed to use the color and heat signatures of the Super Decathlon’s wheel pants, which Fossett had left behind.

The system isn’t perfect. “The north-
ernmost flight pattern is pretty stri-
king, but the rest of it is pretty frustrating out on it,” says Smith. “Trying to deter-
mine whether it’s old mining junk or a
dead airplane— who knows?”

After 15 minutes, our GPS track shows we’re about a half mile from the old wreckage. Johnson takes the controls on his copilot yoke. He banks hard to the left, in a clear view of the crash site. According to the GPS unit, we’re right on top of it. I lean forward. Cynthia Ryan peers through her win-

dow. Ron Ryan and Johnson glance from side to side, then double check the co-
ordinates to ensure that we’re in the right spot. Despite four sets of eyes trained on a patch of ground less than 900 feet below, none of us can spot the airplane.

Finally, on the fifth pass over the site, I glimpse tiny white specks scattered across a treeline slope. The tail section is partially intact, and from the size of the work and it would break into a million pieces.” Plus, the Super Decathlon’s fusel-
age was covered in fabric, if it slammed into a mountain and caught fire, most of that material would burn to ashes. “A
couple of tree limbs could cover the wreckage and that would be that,” says DeCamp.

“Even if Fossett deliberately set his plane down, because of the terrain, the odds of finding it are minuscule,” Derks says.

Ron would have walked away from his downed air-
plane in one piece, only to be killed by the desert heat. Of course, that’s just one theory. I hear plenty of others after a round of martinis with CAP pilots at a upscale steakhouse in Reno.

DeCamp is certain the winds did Fos-
sett in: “He stalled the aircraft trying to cross a ridge and went straight into the
ground. On the way down he might have snapped a few branches, but most of the limbs sprung back and covered

Would you have spotted it? The writer and the CAP officers with him on his search flight kept missing this old aircraft wreck, one of six uncovered in the course of the Fossett search. The Nevada landscape is crude at worst concealing wrecks. It’s SAD TO THINK that Fossett might have walked away from his downed air-

plane in one piece, only to be killed by the desert heat. Of course, that’s just one theory. I hear plenty of others after a round of martinis with CAP pilots at a upscale steakhouse in Reno.

DeCamp is certain the winds did Fos-
sett in: “He stalled the aircraft trying to cross a ridge and went straight into the
ground. On the way down he might have snapped a few branches, but most of the limbs sprung back and covered

the comfort of their PCs. Shortly after
the search started, Google Earth, a
database of satellite images, released
new images of Nevada, and the online
store amazon.com provided amateur
searchers with a Web site where they
could pore over the recent pictures
and alert authorities to possible Fossett
sightings.

“We got e-mail after e-mail, 30 to 40
images of the same thing with a note
saying ‘See attached, here he is,'” laughs
DeCamp. “They had taken a satellite
picture of one of our airplanes flying over the desert!”

At the peak, CAP was getting up to
500 calls a day. “We heard from people
in China, New Zealand, Belgium, Ger-
many—we got so many calls we had to change the number of the office tele-
phone,” says Smith.

Later, when I’m chatting with Hahn, I ask whether more search resources
had been directed at Fossett that would make certain we were comfortable
for my CAP flight— it’s clear and cool,

“Sure, the number of sorties were high,” says Hahn, “but that was due to the area
that had to be searched. Because in some places it was so difficult to see anything,
we kept putting aircraft back in the air
to make certain we were comfortable
with the POD results in those areas. I
can honestly say that with Fossett we really did no more, and certainly no
less, than we would have for any other search.” DeCamp echoes that sentiment: “If you took the politics and notoriety out of it, it would be a normal search and the process wouldn’t change.”

It’s a process that can be grueling. Even with the perfect flying conditions
for my CAP flight—it’s clear and cool,
and the nifty vector indicator shows the air we’re flying through is dead calm—
invisible speed bumps give our little
Cessna a few hard bumps. Trying to keep
my gaze fixed on the ground while we’re getting bounced around makes me queasy, it also induces what CAP folks call the scanner’s headache. When we land for lunch in Carson City, I pop a couple aspirin and down a Coke. I’d been in the air just two hours and I’m embarrassed by my crummy performance and dwindling stamina as a first-time scanner. My head hurts and I’m ready for a nap. And I’ve got a way relatively un-
harmed. Says Hahn: “I’ve come back
from search flights where I woke up the next day and I’m black and blue because I got hit up bad in the airplane, hit-
ting my head and getting slammed against the door.”

This is harsh territory. Fossett was an influential political force in Neva-
ada. Was the disappearance given kid-glove handling?

On November 26, 2007, Peggy Fossett, Steve’s wife of 38 years, petitioned the Cook Coun-
ty Court in Illinois to have her husband de-
clared dead. “I no longer hold out any hope that Steve has survived,” she wrote.