

INSIDE THE HUNT FOR STEVE FOSSETT.

# ANATOMY OF A SEARCH

by Michael Behar



**“YOU ARE LOOKING FOR SOMETHING THAT DOESN’T BELONG:** burned foliage, glinting metal, scorch marks on the ground,” explains Cynthia Ryan, who is sitting next to me in our Cessna 182, making notes about our flight on a yellow legal pad.

It is a crisp and cloudless September morning, and I am serving as a “scanner” on this Civil Air Patrol flight. The job is painful: With my face smushed against the rear starboard window, I squint through the blinding morning sun to scrutinize a jumble of craggy peaks, badlands, arroyos, and withering scrub. Ryan points out Mount Grant, an 11,500-foot-high monolith at 10 o’clock, just as the pilot rolls us sideways to avoid hitting it. “That’s one son-of-a-gun to search because it’s so rugged,” she says.

After millionaire adventurer Steve Fossett and his airplane went missing in Nevada on September 3, 2007, it was the Civil Air Patrol that led the search for him. When I arranged to join the hunt, Ryan, 54, a CAP information officer, insisted I wear one of those motion-sickness medication patches you stick behind your ear. I’ve been jostled in jetliners above South

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 incre-

**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.**

ments. 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 mysteri-

ous 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.

But 24 days had passed since the

search began, and virtually all the journalists had packed up and left, so it was not hard to talk my way onto a search flight.

The CAP was launching its sorties from command centers in Minden, Nevada, and Bishop, California, primarily in Cessna 172s, 182s, and 206s and Gippsland Airvans—over five states (Nevada, California, Oregon, Utah, and Colorado). Crews from the Air National Guard pitched in—flying low and slow in Kiowa and Pave Hawk helicopters and doing sweeps in C-130 transports with infrared sensors and high-definition video. The Naval Air Station in nearby Fallon, Nevada, sent HH-1N “Huey” helicopters with night-vision goggles. Scuba divers plumbed lakes, and hotel heir and billionaire aviation aficionado Barron Hilton dispatched his own squadron of 10 helicopters and nine fixed-wing aircraft from his Flying M Ranch, where Fossett had departed on his final flight. Search teams ultimately scoured 30,000 square nautical miles—an area the size of Maryland. In some instances, CAP pilots made



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The CAP's Nevada wing set up search headquarters at the Minden airport. Many of the patrol's 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 land speed record in his rocket car. That turned out to be incorrect: 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 (nice timing, Wilson), and the CAP set to work. The volunteers supplied their own aircraft; popular ones included Fairchild 24s, Piper J3s and J4s, and Stinson 10As. In World War II, spotters in CAP aircraft painted red and yellow sighted 173 German submarines prowling America's coastal waters. In *Flying Minute Men*, a history of the CAP, Robert Neprud tells of a German naval officer who was asked after the war why Hitler eventually withdrew his U-boats from U.S. shores. “Because of those damned little red-and-yellow planes,” scowled the officer.

Today, the CAP is a nonprofit auxiliary of the U.S. Air Force, which funds

the organization and owns the CAP's fleet of 530 airplanes. There are 1,500 squadrons nationwide (some aircraft are tied to more than one squadron), stationed at 150 locations, “but we could have a base almost anywhere there is a phone and an airstrip,” says Cynthia Ryan. “We have to be fast and flexible and have actually, in years past, run searches off of a CAP member's kitchen table.”

The CAP operates something like a volunteer fire department: Its 57,000 members—including pilots, scanners, radio communications specialists, ground crews, and office personnel—lurk anonymously in our midst until summoned to duty. Many are retired military and airline pilots who joined the force to keep their skills fresh and to fly for free. At times, volunteers sacrifice weeks of vacation, leaving their jobs to join a search.

Last year, the CAP saved the lives of 105 people. One was Dennis Steinbock, a 53-year-old high school civics teacher from Klamath Falls, Oregon. In June, Steinbock purchased a Zodiac 601XL light sport aircraft in Birmingham, Alabama. He was flying it back to Oregon when at 3,200 feet the engine quit, and the airplane plunged into remote woods southwest of Oxford, Mississippi. The airplane crashed through the trees,

and tried doing all kinds of stuff to get their attention,” recalls Steinbock. “I used the lid from an Altoids can, reaching through an opening in the cockpit and flashing it—only I was under 60-foot oak trees and they couldn't see me. But I had a lot of faith in the Civil Air Patrol and was confident they would continue searching.”

He was right: With the ELT fix on Steinbock's location, CAP crews launched a ground search. Three volunteers hiked into the woods and found Steinbock. He'd been trapped for 54 hours.

In Nevada, the CAP runs about 30 searches a year. “Of those, only about half turn out to be lost; the others just land and forget to clear out their flight plans,” says Gary 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 lawyer in charge of the Fossett operation, and has been coordinating the efforts of the CAP, National Guard, Navy, and state authorities.

Whenever 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 fam-

**Gary Derks recalls hashing out search strategy the day Fossett disappeared. “It was nighttime,” he says, “and there was a possibility of him being trapped in one of the canyons. They're narrow and steep and it's tough to see anything.”**

ily member). If the airplane disappears in Nevada, the next call is to Derks. “We start by doing ramp 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 ramp checks turned up nothing after Fossett was reported missing, Derks met with AFRCC brass to hash out the next step.

When he didn't close out his flight plan, the Federal Aviation Administration initiated an investigation. Soon after, the CAP's Mississippi Wing went looking for him.

On impact, the Zodiac's emergency locator transmitter (ELT) had automatically begun sending a Mayday signal. Alerted, the CAP aircraft homed in on the beeps. “I heard the planes flying over



RICH PEDRONCELLI/AP

**Day 5: A Nevada Air National Guard OH-58 Kiowa helicopter lands while a CAP Cessna 182 prepares to take off. Right: ANG's Jeffrey Best searches from a C-130 transport. Opposite: The Wassuk mountains, one of Nevada's 314 ranges – another site that needed searching.**

"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 Navy base in Fallon to conduct a preliminary search with its night-vision Hueys. 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—so at the outset, the search area was a circle with a radius of either 240 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," says Hahn, "where do we start?"

At Minden headquarters the walls are covered with aeronautical sectionals—

big topographic maps. On one, crosshairs mark the Flying M Ranch, ringed by concentric circles that indicate the potential ranges of Fossett's journey.

(Later, a ranch hand reported seeing Fossett's aircraft less than 20 miles from the Hilton ranch's airport, at around 11 a.m. By then, Fossett would have had less than two hours of fuel left, so his aircraft would have gone down within the two-hour range. But questions have been raised as to the time of the witness' sighting, and CAP commanders have not been able to interview the man to assess the credibility of his account.)

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 Betsy Smith, a lanky, fast-talking retired geography professor who warns she'll 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, 63, 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 the state. Schroeder is a master certified flight instructor with a specialty in mountain flying. He tells me that



SRA TOM RUSSELL/DOO

on the lee side." Fossett's airplane had a top speed of 155 mph. Even a moderate gust would halve his airspeed almost instantly. "The tumbling air can turn an aircraft upside down, cause structural damage in flight, and eventually cause a crash," says Schroeder.

**WHILE SEARCHING FOR FOSSETT** the Nevada CAP air crews spotted six other wrecks they weren't looking for. "We checked them all out," Derk says. "There were no skeletal remains. We got tail numbers and serial numbers and determined that at some point they had all been identified."

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 Cynthia Ryan. Indeed, Nevada encompasses 314 named mountain ranges, and it has more peaks over 10,000 feet than any other state. Though it's the seventh largest state in the nation, it's the eighth least populated, and no wonder: It's a buckled, folded, twisted labyrinth of sheer slopes and jagged volcanic rock.



RICH PEDRONCELLI/AP

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

Russ Johnson, a 68-year-old retired Air Force pilot. Johnson, a no-nonsense man-of-few-words, isn't entirely enthralled by 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

**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 backside like a waterfall."**

zips past at 125 mph, while enduring short bursts of overwhelming visual distraction 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 satellite transmitter, a setup that lets the crew take photos of the ground and send them anywhere in the world instantly. In addition, the Cessna is equipped with a Garmin G1000 "glass cockpit": The instruments are displayed digitally on dual LCD screens in front of the pilot and copilot. The GPS unit is integrated into the glass display, and our route to the wreckage is highlighted in yellow. 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 crimson sea.

Only a few Cessnas in the CAP's nationwide fleet have this fancy navigation and imaging technology. But the CAP also has 16 Gippsland Airvans, each with an imaging system called ARCHER (Airborne Real-time Cueing Hyperspectral 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 object 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 northern Nevada desert has lots of stuff lying out on it," says Smith. "Trying to determine 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, giving me a clear view of the crash site. According to the GPS unit, we're right on top of it. I crane forward. Cynthia Ryan peers through her win-

dow. Ron Ryan and Johnson glance from side to side, then double-check the coordinates 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 treeless slope. The tail section is partially intact, and from the size of

work and it would break into a million pieces." Plus, the Super Decathlon's fuselage 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.



**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 cruelly good at concealing wrecks.**

it, we figure the airplane is quite large.

It is definitely a lot bigger than Fossett's single-engine, two-seat Bellanca Citabria, "a little bitty airplane that would come apart in a heartbeat," in the words of Dion DeCamp, 73, who commands the CAP Nevada Wing. "You could pull the wings off the thing with your bare hands." DeCamp is a former Air Force C-130 pilot and American Airlines captain. "If Fossett hit anything, the chance of finding the plane is very small because there's not much metal frame-

**IT'S SAD TO THINK** that Fossett might have walked away from his downed airplane 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 an upscale steakhouse in Reno.

DeCamp is certain the winds did Fossett 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

him up. Eventually, the deer hunters will find him."

"I had a psychic who called me three times a day, every day, from Ontario," complains Cynthia Ryan. "He kept insisting that Fossett was up north in the Black Rock Desert near Burning Man [an annual performance-art hippiefest]."

DeCamp bemoans the inundation of tips from people convinced they had single-handedly found Fossett from

**Were more search resources directed at Fossett than would have been directed at some run-of-the-mill Wrongway Feldman who flies his airplane into oblivion? Fossett was wealthy and newsworthy; his pal Barron Hilton is an influential political force in Nevada. Was the disappearance given kid-glove handling?**

in China, New Zealand, Belgium, Germany—we got so many calls we had to change the number of the office telephone," says Smith.

Later, when I'm chatting with Hahn, I ask whether more search resources had been directed at Fossett than would have been directed at some run-of-the-mill Wrongway Feldman who flies his airplane into oblivion. Fossett was wealthy and newsworthy; his pal Barron Hilton is an influential political force in Nevada. Was the case given kid-glove handling? At the peak of the search, more than two dozen aircraft were aloft at one time. "Our fuel bill was \$38,000," says Cynthia Ryan. "Normal ops for the Nevada wing would be \$8,000 a month." Total number of CAP search sorties launched: 969.

"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." Derks 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 hits. Trying to keep my gaze fixed on the ground while we're getting bounced around not only 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 gotten away relatively unharmed. Says Hahn: "I've come back from search flights where I wake up the next day and I'm black and blue because I got beat up so bad in the airplane, hitting my head and getting slammed against the door."

This is harsh territory. Fossett was an exceptional pilot who knew how to get himself out of harrowing situations. But somehow the land or the wind or the heat or some combination of these defeated him.

And for all the thousands of miles they've searched, some CAP officers believe Fossett isn't far away. Studies of recent search-and-rescue operations show that the preponderance of crashes occur within a relatively short distance from either end of the runway. "Airplanes don't often just fall out of the sky en route, when they are at altitude and grinding along," says Cynthia Ryan. "It's the takeoff/departure and approach/landing that poses the greatest risk for failure."

"What do we believe in our gut?" she continues. "Fossett is somewhere in a 20- to 25-mile radius of the ranch. He's there, in a small debris field, obscured by the commonplace of shadow and ground cover or foliage. That's not glamorous, is it? Not like taking off and just disappearing." ✈️

*On November 26, 2007, Peggy Fossett, Steve's wife of 38 years, petitioned the Cook County Court in Illinois to have her husband declared dead. "I no longer hold out any hope that Steve has survived," she wrote.*