



# SURVIVOR

*After his cabin burned down in mid-December a young homesteader used common sense and resources at hand to endure more than 20 days of blowing snow and subzero temperatures.*

*By Ken Marsh*

**T**he cabin roof caught fire around 1 or 2 a.m., Tyson Steele said. That's when the first jolt of terror seized him and spurred him to action. He leapt out of bed, pulled on his felt-lined pac boots, and stumbled out the door. The temperature was 15 degrees below zero, but Steele hardly noticed. Standing outside he looked up at the roof and saw flames lighting the sky.

The 30-year-old homesteader figures the date was either December 17 or 18. He's not certain because he'd been living alone since September in a remote corner of the Susitna Valley. Miles and miles of forests, hills, rivers, and lakes separated him from the road system.

He had no snowmachine. And his nearest neighbor was 20 miles away, in the tiny community of Skwentna. Steele's only way in or out of the wilderness was by air charter.

As he rushed back into his home, Steele was met by an explosive ball of flame. He knew immediately that the decisions he made within the next few seconds would determine whether he survived until dawn. What he couldn't know was that these would be the first in a series of life-or-death decisions he would be forced to make until the Alaska State Troopers' Helo 3 arrived to rescue him more than 20 days later.

Hours after the rescue, I sat with Steele at the Alaska State Troopers' Aircraft Section Hangar at Lake Hood. Troopers pilot Cliff Gilliland and Tactical Flight Officer Trooper Zac Johnson, who'd conducted the rescue in response to a welfare check request from friends of Steele's, had set him up with a shower and accommodated his request for a long dreamed-of "McDonald's Combo Meal No. 2."

Steele's shoulder-length hair, chestnut brown near the roots fading to golden blond near its frayed tips, hung matted and dreadlocks-like over his neck. His auburn beard flowed untrimmed to his chest. The combination made him seem vaguely reminiscent of actor Tom Hanks' character in the movie "Cast Away."

He wore black, plastic-framed, Woody Allen-style glasses – said he's nearly blind without them – and an old set of greasy, charcoal-smudged coveralls salvaged from a shed after the fire. His clothes smelled of smoke and his hands were calloused, rough, and ash-stained. Nonetheless, he appeared healthy overall and energetic as he nursed a tall cup of McDonald's coffee. He seemed happy to talk, and certainly to have survived 22 or 23 days in the wilderness.

Here is Steele's story, in his own words, as he told it on Thursday, January 9, the afternoon of his rescue:

*"It started with a pretty hasty mistake. My woodstove is very, very old. The mistake I made – sorry, my thoughts are still a little scattered – the mistake I made, I got hasty and I put a big piece of cardboard in the stove to start the fire. Which I knew was a problem, I've had woodstoves all my life. I knew that you don't do that. So, it sent a spark out through the chimney which landed on the roof. And the roof ... how do I even explain this 'cabin'?"*

*"It's basically a plastic Quonset hut. The guy I bought it from, he was a Vietnam vet, and he built it out of just one-bys and tarps. It was pretty cool. It stayed pretty warm; it caught the southern sun, even on these dark days. I had a jalapeno plant growing all the way up to the fire. It didn't*

*produce many peppers. I pulled one off on Thanksgiving that was about the size of my thumb, that was my Thanksgiving treat to myself. Anyways, so it's all plastic, right? That piece of cardboard, I presume, falls on the piece of plastic and it slowly burns.*

*"It's 1 or 2 in the morning and I'd been awakened to a cold cabin, right? So, it takes me a while to go back to sleep. And, drip, drip, drip – there's fiery drips of plastic coming through the roof above me. So, I go outside to pick up some ... snow and I just see that the whole roof's on fire.*

[Asked what he was wearing at that point, Steele chuckled:] *"These boots [pacs] with no socks. I was wearing these long johns – this base layer – and this [heavy wool] sweater. Basically, that's what I'm wearing now."*

[Did you have the overalls you're wearing now, as well?] *"I did not. This was stashed in a shed. It's a mildewed, rotting piece of 1980s ... I don't what, you know? I found it and I put it on, and it was pretty stiff from being so cold in the shed for so long.*

*"So, it starts dripping and it, it goes up into flames faster than, like, I can even imagine. It just, like, from the point of going back and seeing the roof on fire, going back in, like, smoke everywhere. There's this image that keeps coming back in my mind of a swirling flame coming sideways for my face, you know?*

*And the worst part of all of this – I can survive 23 days again – but my dog was in there, asleep by my side. Day after day for the last six years he, he's six years old. ... Was."*

[For a moment Steele chokes up slightly, his eyes misting. He's asked, What kind of dog?] *"Lab. Chocolate lab. 110 pounds. Um, his name was Phil. Best dog in the world. So, so happy. I just can't even describe. And then, um, he was so scared of the fire and in my thinking I've gotta grab Phil and I've gotta grab some stuff to sleep in so I basically ... I grabbed everything that was on my bed. You know, blankets on my bed. I just grabbed some coats, some sleeping bags – whatever – just a bag of something and whatever and wrapped it up in the blanket and I rush outside, and I tell Phil, 'Get out of here! Get out of here!' And he jumps off the bed, and I think it's good, right? I think he's left. And so I go outside."*

*"And, and, uh, that's when I, I stepped outside and everything's on fire. I've got to think of what to do next. I go grab my rifle around the other side of the cabin – .338. And, and, and my dog*

*starts howling, right? Inside. And I thought he was not inside. And that's when there was ... I was hysterical. Right? I had no logic. Nothing. ... I have no words for what sorrow; it was just, just a scream. Just a visceral – not angry, not sad, just, like, that's all I could express – just scream. Felt like I tore my lung out.*



*Tyson Steele, left, is greeted by Helo 3 Tactical Flight Officer Zac Johnson upon being rescued after more than 20 days stranded in the wilderness after his cabin burned down.*

*“So I, I, I grab all my stuff, I sit down and ... and from there it gets, it's foggy, um ... because I just, everything just went so fast. Everything that I owned was consolidated in that cabin. That was another problem. All my bullets, I had 500 rounds, probably, and shotgun shells, .338 shells, 9 mm, .44 – a whole bunch of different shells. The one I recovered was out of bullets and the bullets were in an ammo box exploding. Pow, pow, pow, pow, pow! It was like a war zone. It was just 500 rounds going off all at once. I don't know if I can even approach the cabin to put it out. There's 500 rounds of ammunition going off!*

*“After sitting there for a while, I think, OK, I gotta get my food. A two-year food supply in there. But here's problem Number 3 or 4 ... I had it stored with all of the Crisco and oils and greases and whatnot – and right next to the bullets, too – and the fire just picked that up and there was a propane tank there, too. [Steele imitates the sound of an explosion with his mouth]. So, there's explosions going everywhere. The fire is just a huge, massive grease fire. Every shovel of*

*snow that I throw on it – I’m hysterical trying to put it out and it’s not doing anything. And I worked up into the morning, into the light trying to put out various sections of the fire.*

*“So, we’re close to the darkest night of the year, right? So ... at light, I’m not cold at this point, so I just sit down by my burning house. In fact, I remember throwing a few logs on one of the corners to keep it going. I started going through a plan. The whole pantry area at this time was covered in snow. So, my first object[ive] was making inventory. And eat something! Because I’d been working my butt off all night. And I got all my cans and I figured I had two cans a day for 30 days on rations.... I also had a jar of beans. A couple jars of peanut butter – it was melted plastic. I had a jar of mayonnaise but didn’t touch that [he laughs]. The thing was, maybe half of those cans, they’ve heated up and popped open and the smoke’s circulating inside the can – plastic, whatever, um, insulation. So, it tastes like my home, just burning.*

*“Last night’s meal was probably one of the worst. I was leaving the burned-off stuff for the last. And last night’s dinner was a can of plastic-smoked refried beans. No hickory, no mesquite [he laughs] it’s Class A waterproof tarp [flavor].*

*“So, the first two nights I slept in a snow cave. It was just big enough for my sleeping bags and me and a couple things of food. And that stayed, you know, snow caves are pretty nice for survival. There’s a lot of insulation. It can be negative 40 outside and if you have a candle – which I didn’t – but if you do, it can be above 30 degrees. But I just huddled into that dark cave and I slept. I slept for a really long time. And it was, it was warm. Warmer than outside.*

*“And my next goal was to build a shelter that can be a little more comfortable. I made the connections of, of ... pardon me as I work through this ... how am I going to ... when are people going to start getting worried about me? When I got there – I call it the homestead at this point – in September I had a brand-new phone and it had battery charging issues that I did not find out about until I got there. So, I’m stuck with just a crappy phone. It just doesn’t charge. In fact, I could plug it in and I could watch the percentage go down. So, it made me break another rule that I’d established for years, and that was to be strict on my communication weekly – call my parents and let them know I’m good. But, uh, because it was just crappy, I maybe would not do it on the weekend. I would do it a few days after. I’d call up and they’d say yeah, we were a little worried, and I’d say it’s this crappy phone.*

*Pretty much Skwentna is 20 miles away. I've heard there's someone at Donkey Creek Lake 5 miles away. And that was going to be my next goal if nobody picked me up by Day 35. I was going to go just that direction. But, uh, but yeah, I couldn't count on that. And it had snowed! Like a tremendous amount of powder. There was, like, I remember it snowed for like three days and there was probably about three feet of powder. And then it was clear for a while and then it snowed [again] and there was another foot, and then another 6 inches. There was almost 5 feet of powder out there. And my two pairs of snowshoes burned up. And so, I just have these boots and some crappy socks that were full of holes to walk through this powder. And it, it took me days just to go a quarter mile. [Steele takes a pen and draws a rough map on some paper of a lake a quarter-mile from his homestead that planes can land on in winter.] So, I thought if someone is going to come and get me it's going to be my air service.*

*"Because my parents, my neighbors they'll say 'I haven't heard from him,' and they'll call [the air service] and he'll come check it out, OK? So, one of my goals was to just pave a trail top the lake. Check the ice depth to make sure it could land. And that took days, just to get to the lake a quarter mile.*

*"There's trees all around here but [the homestead plot] is pretty clear, so I stamped a big SOS and I used some ashes from the fireplace to make it black, keep it dark, and I had to keep doing that often because it would snow and I would have to redo it. I figured that was going to be my best signal. There was no plane traffic real close. I heard planes probably every day, you know. There was some airliners up in the sky and I'm like ... maybe I should get some gasoline and ...*

[Steele next scavenged tarps and scrap lumber to build a tent-like domed shelter around the woodstove that have once heated his Quonset hut.]

*"Once I got the second shelter built, I kept a fire in the woodstove perpetually. And I basically use that to heat up my food. It's not about keeping the shelter warm, because it basically just took that edge off. And one night, the 17<sup>th</sup> [night], it was so cold, and I just didn't want to go outside. So I took a bucket to go pee in. And the bucket is only a couple feet away from this fireplace and it freezes, my pee freezes within a few minutes next to the fireplace. That gives you an idea. It's by no means a cozy cabin that I was able to put together. It just took the edge off. I could still see my breath, but at least I wasn't suffering. And I spent a lot of my days, a lot*

*of my time – say this is the woodstove and this is my cot, and I would be like this [Steele demonstrates how he would almost hug the stove].*

*[Asked about his background in outdoors survival, Steele responded:] I'm not exactly trained. I've just always been in the outdoors. And in the outdoor industry. My first job back in high school for five years I worked at a gear shop, so I was familiar with all the technical, you know, fire starting equipment. Axes, bush craft. Watched a lot of Youtube videos. I even started my own Youtube channel while I was up there. Only got one video out, though. And all my video footage went up in flames. So, I've just always liked to interface with the environment directly to survive. I challenge myself to make fire all the time. ... Because if I need to in the future, I just want to make sure I can do it and I can tackle the problems.*

*I had some matches. And I carried a candle with me – I one candle that I found – and that can stay lit. And I always had several pieces of birch bark. Birch bark is great for starting fires. And it was also my light quite often in the snow cave. I had nothing to think about [during the long, dark nights], just set a piece of birch bark on the fire and it would light up for just a minute and I would be like, oh, yeah! I could see!*

*I didn't have a map and I knew I didn't have enough knowledge of the whereabouts. I could have said oh, [let's go] that direction. But I have no idea what waterways stay frozen enough for me to walk through – I could fall through the ice. They bend around so much I could lose my direction. I only have six hours of [daylight] travel. I had a headlamp for maybe 10 or 11 days, but I only had the batteries that were in there. So, I ran out of light.”*

Now that he's been rescued, Steele plans to regroup.

*“I'm probably going to go back home to Salt Lake City. Not 'back' home, because this is my home,” he says with conviction, “but to my family.”*

*“They've got a dog,” he said smiling, but with a look of sadness in his eyes. “And that would be some therapy. “*

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