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Wreckage of Missing Plane Found in Snowy Mountains; Search for Pilot Continues

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The wreckage of a missing aircraft in the New South Wales Snowy Mountains has been located, but the condition of the pilot, 74-year-old David Stephens, remains unknown.

Mr. Stephens, a Bega resident and experienced flyer, took off from Wangaratta in Victoria on Tuesday afternoon in his 1966 Beechcraft Debonair aircraft. He was headed to Moruya on the New South Wales south coast but never arrived, prompting a wide-scale search.

Authorities confirmed that a rescue helicopter spotted the suspected wreckage around 4pm on Thursday, close to the aircraft's last known GPS location in the rugged and snowy terrain of the mountains. The New South Wales Police Force has since taken over the investigation and will continue their efforts on Friday.

Mr. Stephens had recently taken his plane in for a routine inspection and minor maintenance before departing. According to Tony Rettke, president of the Frog's Hollow Flyers aero club, the aircraft was in excellent condition. "It was immaculate, incredibly beautiful, and well maintained," Rettke said.

Mr. Stephens was a well-respected member of the Frog's Hollow Flyers and had years of experience flying. His wife, Lynda Leigh, described him as passionate about aviation and heartbroken about the situation.

"David disappeared on his flight home after having his aircraft inspected," Ms. Leigh said in a statement. "Mountain weather can change fast, and we can only assume he saw a way through and made the decision to continue. David knew that aircraft well, but we don't know what he faced. We'll only get answers once they locate him along with the plane."

Photos shared by the family show Mr. Stephens' love for aviation from an early age, including an image of him as a child standing near a plane with his father.

Along with being a pilot, Mr. Stephens worked as an accountant and was just two months away from retirement. He was also known locally as a rally sport commentator in the Sapphire Coast region. "It's even more heartbreaking knowing we were just about to spend more time together after decades of work," Ms. Leigh added.

The Australian Maritime Safety Authority led the search with support from New South Wales Police, State Emergency Service, National Parks and Wildlife Service, and Snowy Hydro. Search crews faced extremely difficult conditions, including heavy snowfall and steep alpine terrain.

Investigations into the crash will continue, and authorities have yet to release further updates on Mr. Stephens' condition.