

Let us sing praise to an unknown hero

In the frozen hell of Antarctica, three Australians trapped in a snow-going tractor teetered on the brink of icy death. A young American scientist, David Schneider, inched his way across 10 agonizing feet of treacherous ice to their rescue. One misstep, one false move could have sent them all plunging to the bottom of the glacial abyss.

In bone-chilling, subzero temperature, the 35-year-old government map expert extricated the three Aussies from the cab of their vehicle, which was tilted over a 60-foot-deep crevasse. Painstakingly, he hauled them to safety. For his courageous

exploit, Schneider is our first nominee to a modern-day Hall of Heroes, which we are establishing to honor those whose unselfish acts of valor might otherwise go unrecognized.

Schneider's challenge came on May 18, 1974. With three fellow scientists, he had set up a remote encampment on the South Pole icecap to conduct ice-drilling experiments. That day their bleak routine was disrupted by a barely audible bleep of distress on their radio.

The faint SOS came from a three-man Australian crew out of Casey Station base camp. Their "snow caterpillar" had skidded and toppled

across a deep crevasse, wedging the men inside the vehicle. Without hesitation, Schneider and an Australian colleague raced to their own snow cat and set off to the rescue.

A native of Wisconsin, Schneider is no stranger to snow. But the conditions that day were almost unimaginable — a "whiteout" where all depth perception is lost and the human eye can see only a few feet ahead. The thermometer read 20 below zero.

"We found them with a lot of luck," Schneider recalled. "We weren't even sure we were headed in the right direction until we came across their tracks."

On reaching the scene, Schneider ventured on foot to the trapped Australians. They were staring from their vehicle into the frozen pit beneath them, almost afraid to breathe. The ice-glazed surface concealed other treacherous crevasses, and Schneider had to find bridges of solid snow to reach the helpless men. "You get so you can tell from the sound whether it's safe or not," Schneider explained. "If there's a hollow crunch, you figure there's a crevasse."

At a snail's pace, the slender American finally reached the disabled vehicle, canted at a 70-degree angle over the ravine. He pulled himself to a rear door, pried it open with an ice axe and threw a rope to the occupants so he could haul them out.

Schneider wasn't finished yet. The Aussies' caterpillar contained \$50,000 worth of scientific equipment, so he and the others scaled down the sides of the crevasse to lash the tractor securely until heavy rescue equipment could arrive.

Only then did Schneider take the three men he had rescued back to Casey Station. Asked what they did to celebrate, the laconic Schneider told us: "There wasn't much to celebrate with. There was no liquor allowed at Casey Station, and we were allotted only six cans of beer a month."

Now working at the government's mapmaking center in Rolla, Mo., Schneider is reticent about his ex-

periences in Antarctica. In fact, when we first sought him out and interviewed him, he neglected to mention a subsequent heroic exploit during his months at the South Pole. We learned of it from one of the three Australians he saved, Paul Varma, who headed the polar party at Casey Station.

In August 1974, in the dead of Antarctica's winter, Varma assigned Schneider to lead a major trek inland toward the South Pole. The expedition was caught in a punishing blizzard 120 miles out and was snowbound for 12 days.

The stranded party lost radio contact with the base camp; it was restored only after Schneider devised a way to radio another station nearby 1,000 miles away. Varma gave Schneider high praise for maintaining the morale and well-being of his four companions "during this period of extreme anxiety and isolation."

The determined Schneider persisted in his mission even after one of his main vehicles broke down and supplies ran low in 35-degree-below-zero weather. Only when directly ordered did he head back for safety.

When we prodded his memory on the August escapade, Schneider finally volunteered some information. "That was even scarier than the other," he told our associate Sam Fogg. "The wind was so great, we couldn't see more than six feet, and could move from one tent to another only by hanging onto guide ropes."

A friend of Schneider's told us that the modest government scientist does have an Achilles heel. As a surveyor in the Louisiana bayou country years ago, he had a really bad time. Our nominee for the Hall of Heroes is afraid of snakes.

Footnote: In this age of the cynical anti-hero, old-fashioned self-sacrifice is supposedly out of fashion. But we're convinced there are many Americans who risk their lives to help their fellow man. We're looking for stories of these unsung heroes. If you know of one, write to The Hall of Heroes, P.O. Box 2300, Washington, D.C. 20013.

Washington merry-go-round

By JACK ANDERSON

