

# Steeves, John Milton (1905–1998)

Basharit Saddique, and Sylvestar Shangpliang  
John Milton Steeves was an Adventist missionary in Pakistan, India, Burma (now Myanmar), and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and later an American diplomat in Japan and Indonesia and ambassador to Afghanistan.

## Early Life

John Milton Steeves was born to Canadian parents,<sup>1</sup> Andrew Wellington and Sarah Salisbury Steeves, on May 6, 1905, in Minnewaukan, North Dakota.<sup>2</sup> His ancestors were German immigrants from Osnabruck<sup>3</sup> who immigrated to North America in search of religious freedom.<sup>4</sup> They first lived in Philadelphia,<sup>5</sup> but eventually settled in New Brunswick, Canada.<sup>6</sup> As a young man, John Steeves' father moved to North Dakota to homestead under the North Dakota Homestead Act<sup>7</sup> and acquired property in the Devils Lake area,<sup>8</sup> later known as Brinsmade.<sup>9</sup> It was here the family became quite well off, overcoming their early struggles. They moved again to establish a homestead in northern Alberta when John Steeves was only a child.<sup>10</sup> Between 1910 and 1919, John Steeves lived there with his family.<sup>11</sup> Eventually, between 1919 and 1927,<sup>12</sup> after the demise of his mother, John Steeves' family returned to the United States and settled in western Washington.<sup>13</sup>

John Steeves was very much influenced by his father. It was through him that he accepted Adventism and was baptized by Elder C. K. Reiswig in July 1916 in Lacombe, Alberta, Canada.<sup>14</sup>

## Education and Marriage



John Milton Steeves (on the far left).

Photo courtesy of Gordon Christo.

John Steeves had his early education in Canadian schools in Alberta.<sup>15</sup> Between 1910 and 1914 he attended Sparling Public School, and between 1914 and 1917 he studied in Coal Lake in Millet, Alberta. He studied in government schools for seven years. Between 1917 and 1920, he studied at Canadian Junior College. Between 1921 and 1923, he completed the academic course at Western Washington Academy.<sup>16</sup> Between 1923 and 1927, he studied at and graduated from Walla Walla College<sup>17</sup> with a B.A. degree. While he was a missionary, he also graduated from Washington University of Seattle, with a master of arts degree in education and science.<sup>18</sup>

John Steeves married a German lady, Frieda L. Kolm, daughter of Theodore and Minnie Kolm.<sup>19</sup> Maxine Drozella was the only child born to the couple.

## Ministry

John Steeves worked as a colporteur in Montana in 1920 and in Western Washington Conference in 1922.<sup>20</sup> In 1926 he served as a physical education instructor at Walla Walla College.<sup>21</sup> After he graduated from Walla Walla College in 1927, he was appointed as director of the Sabbath School and educational departments of the Alberta Conference.<sup>22</sup> From 1928 to 1929, he served as principal of Chuharkana Mandi boarding school in West Pakistan (now Pakistan Adventist Seminary and College).<sup>23</sup> In 1930 he was appointed principal of Roorkee School.<sup>24</sup> After several years of service in Roorkee School, in 1937 he was appointed as the secretary of the education department and the young people's Missionary Volunteer Society of the Southern Asia Division.<sup>25</sup> As director of the education department in the division, he carried with him the motto to ensure "Every Seventh-day Adventist youth receiving an education in our schools."<sup>26</sup> After decades of service as principal of several schools and in charge of the educational work throughout India, Burma (now Myanmar), and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka),<sup>27</sup> Steeves finally returned to America in 1943.<sup>28</sup>

It was during World War II that Steeves grew somewhat disillusioned with some aspects of missionary work,<sup>29</sup> and also became a non-conformist doctrinally.<sup>30</sup> He was also interested in serving his country, and he returned to his country to serve the war effort. Between 1943 and 1945, he joined the armed services and was posted to the Psychological Warfare Unit of the Office of War Information for Overseas.<sup>31</sup> He was given the rank of colonel and appointed to the Chinese-Burma-India theater<sup>32</sup> because of his ability to understand their languages.<sup>33</sup> He was in the military service until 1950, when he had been in charge of the Near East and Africa division where India, Burma, and Ceylon were part of the division because of their geographical locations.<sup>34</sup>

In 1951 Steeves became a career diplomat,<sup>35</sup> and he was appointed as a political counselor at the U. S. Embassy in Tokyo until 1953.<sup>36</sup> In between, he also served as acting ambassador to Jakarta, Indonesia, and then returned to Japan as consul general in the Ryukyu Islands from 1955 to 1956. He was deputy assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs from 1959 to 1962.<sup>37</sup> Between 1962 and 1966 he served as an ambassador to Afghanistan.

<sup>38</sup> From 1966 to 1969, Steeves served as director-general of the American Foreign Service.<sup>39</sup> He retired from the

Foreign Service in 1969.<sup>40</sup>

## Later years

Steeves was known as a specialist in Asian affairs. After his retirement he moved to Pennsylvania.<sup>41</sup> He died in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, in 1998.<sup>42</sup>

## Contribution

Steeves made a tremendous contribution to the Church during his ministry. As a secretary of the two departments to which he was appointed, he was key in the establishment and growth of schools and colleges and responsible for an increase in baptisms.<sup>43</sup> Major educational councils and conventions were held during his tenure.<sup>44</sup> He made a tremendous impact during the war and in his foreign dealings as a military personnel and diplomat.

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