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Did They Have to Die?

Forty years after five missionaries lost their lives in the Ecuadorian jungle, the killers explain what really happened.

Steve Saint

The year of *Christianity Today's* birth also brought the death of five American missionaries in Ecuador: Nate Saint, Jim Elliot, Roger Youderian, Ed McCully, and Peter Fleming. The story of what happened on that January day in 1956—first told in newsweeklies and *Life* magazine and then in numerous books and documentaries—became a primary narrative for the young evangelical movement, reinforcing and illustrating to the world our core ideals. Their noble sacrifice and the heroic follow-up work of family members like Rachel Saint, the sister of Nate, and Jim Elliot's widow, Elisabeth, inspired a generation of Christians—some to go to the mission field and many more to live a more mature and sacrificial Christian life.

While the story is familiar, many of the details have been unknown. Why were the missionaries attacked, especially after such promising initial contacts with their eventual killers, the Huaorani? Why didn't the missionaries use their guns to defend themselves?

Steve Saint grew up with these questions about the final moments of his father's life. Despite spending school vacations among and working with the now-Christian Huaorani, Steve only recently has gotten his answers—which have served to make the story even more amazing and inspiring still.

This article, like our August cover story, appears as a chapter in *Martyrs: Contemporary Writers on Modern Lives of Faith*, a collection of essays edited by Susan Bergman (Harper San Francisco).

As I made my final approach to the short jungle airstrip, I could tell I was coming in a little high. I pushed the flap lever all the way down, but it still wasn't going to be enough to get me down on the tiny mud-and-grass strip. I decided to pick up speed, staying on the approach glide path to get the feel for my next try. I had just spent three weeks building a new airstrip with the Huaorani people in Ecuador, but this was my first landing in Huaorani/Auca territory, and this little strip wasn't exactly what the engineers had in mind when they designed this Cessna 172.

Racing down the field just ten feet in the air, I could clearly see the faces of the Huaorani people lining the strip. As I pulled up and banked to the left to start another approach, I could see the river and what is left of the sandbar where my father, Nate Saint, had made his first approach, the very first approach ever in Huaorani territory, just 40 years ago. He and fellow missionaries Jim Elliot, Ed McCully, Pete Fleming, and Roger Youderian had set up camp on that little sandbar in hopes of making contact with the primitive Aucas, known for their fierce infighting and hatred of outsiders. The five missionaries had a deep burden to share the gospel message with a people known only for hunting and killing. Their initial friendly contact ended in death by spearing.

On my second try, I was right on the numbers. Crossing the final bushes, I cut the power and the wheels touched down solid, just ten feet from the mark I had chosen. I hopped out to say hello, but I was in a hurry to take off again before the afternoon thunderheads started to drop their torrential rains and trap my

little plane in mud, making a takeoff impossible. Dad, I remembered, had flown the Piper Family Cruiser off the beach each afternoon for much the same reason while awaiting the first contact with the "savages," as the Quechua word Auca means.

So much was the same, and yet circumstances were so different! The past three weeks I had been carving a new airstrip out of the virgin jungle with "the people" (which is what their own Huaorani word means), some of whom had murdered my father and his friends just before my fifth birthday.

Mincaye was one of them. Mincaye, with whom I had just gone hunting, who laughed and joked about everything, who had tried the hula hoop on his first friendly contact with the outside. He had been on the beach that fateful day in 1956. There was no laughing on that visit.

Dyuwi, shy, sweet Dyuwi, who hung around our camp each night waiting for a break in the conversation so he could thank Wangongi (creator God) for keeping us safe from falling trees, Konga ants, and poisonous snakes: he too had been there. Just a teenager then, and certainly just as shy, he was nevertheless an up-and-coming killer who knew what they had come to do and went about it-no doubt with the same vigor I had seen him demonstrate on a huge stump he'd been working for the last three days to clear from our landing strip.

Kimo, who brought his canoe full of provisions so we would have plenty to eat while we worked on the strip, had also been there in 1956. He told me that the last of the five young cowodi (foreigners/strangers) had fled across the river, away from the attack, and instead of fleeing into the jungle and safety, had climbed onto a log and called in poor Huao, "We just came to meet you. We aren't going to hurt you. Why are you killing us?" It was this same gentle Kimo who listened to this plea and then ran a nine-foot hardwood spear through the foreigner's chest.

Why did these gentle, kindhearted men I had been eating, sleeping, and working alongside kill my father and his friends? Why did the missionaries not defend themselves with guns against primitive spears? Why leave five young women widowed, nine children fatherless? What had caused the Huaorani to kill the very men who had called to them from the plane that they were friends, who had exchanged gifts with them on a line dropped from the circling plane?

Historically, every encounter with the Huaorani had ended in death, from the sixteenth-century conquistadors to seventeenth-century Jesuits to nineteenth-century gold and rubber hunters. Toward the end of 1955, the oil companies were closing in on Huaorani territory, an area of about 2,500 square miles. This tribe of unknown size and location was seen to be an irritant to development. Not only had they killed oil company employees who ventured into their territory, but they had even lain in ambush outside the big oil camps and killed unsuspecting employees right outside their own quarters. Little was said about the raids made by gun-wielding oil company men against the people, but every Huaorani killing was told and retold in the oil camps until "Auca" savagery and killing prowess gained almost mystical power to strike fear into the hearts of even seasoned jungle workers. Soldiers had been dispatched to protect oil camps, and there was talk of a military attempt at wiping out this "nuisance."

Confrontation was inevitable, and the question was not would the Huaoranis be contacted, but who would contact them and with what intentions. Would the contact group take medicines and go in peace to live among the people, or would they go with poisoned meat and booby traps and guns to see the nuisance was eliminated or driven deep into the jungle where it would no longer impede the progress of civilization?

Nate Saint, Jim Elliot, and Ed McCully, three college friends working as missionaries in Ecuador, had a burning desire to follow Jesus' command to take the gospel message into all the world. They had prayed for years for this primitive group that had never heard the redemption story of peace with God through the death of Christ. Now the men began to feel they should act soon or perhaps lose the opportunity for

peaceful contact.

The first challenge was somehow to establish that they were friendly and intended no harm—no easy task when you can't speak a common language or safely get close enough to try communicating in any other way. They didn't even know for sure where in the jungles the semi-nomadic Huaorani could be found. My father had generally avoided flying over their territory as he delivered goods to various missionaries in the dense jungle, but as the dry season approached (the time most likely to expose a sandbar big enough to land Dad's small plane), he and Ed flew over the area and spotted one small Huaorani clearing.

The three men rounded out their team with two more: Pete Fleming, a friend of Jim and Ed's, working in Ecuador with the same mission group, and Roger Youderian, who had been working with the Jivaros, known as the "head shrinkers" of the Ecuadorian jungles. A veteran of the World War II paratroopers, Roger possessed a jungle savvy and an ability to live and travel like the Indians.

These five men were not cast from the same mold. Jim was impetuous but focused. Both a college wrestler and a writer, his good looks and physical strength were matched by a deep introspection. Ed McCully, president of his college class, had played football end and won his senior oratory contest. Everyone expected him to go to law school, but something stronger called him to the jungles of the Amazon. Dad was born into an artist's family but picked up a stray gene. He loved the technical and mechanical aspects of life and wanted to use his interest and skills for a purpose with dimensions that would honor God and outlast the temporal. Flying support for missionaries was a way to fulfill both of his desires. Pete was the youngest of the group, but in some ways the group's sage. Roger was the guy you sent to do the job when it took dogged determination and a completely willing heart to get it done.

Here were five common young men whose unifying distinction was less their inherited abilities or acquired skills than their commitment to seek God's will and to carry out his purposes for their lives. They were aware of the risk they were taking but felt it was justified, though they could have had no idea of the impact their martyrdom would someday have.

The men studied oil company reports and talked to everyone they could who might give them additional insight into the Huao culture. They began to develop a plan, knowing there was no way to eliminate all danger, but also realizing they each had a family and other responsibilities that dictated caution as well as speed. My father and Ed flew back and forth over the jungle and discovered a tiny clearing. They gleaned a short repertoire of Huao phrases from Dayuma, a Huao girl who had fled almost certain death from intratribal spearings and was living on a hacienda outside Huao territory. My father's sister, Rachel, was living with Dayuma and studying the Huao language, sure that God had called her to live with this tribe someday and teach them how to walk on God's trail.

The missionaries began making regular overflights to drop friendship gifts from the plane, calling over a loudspeaker, "We like you. We are your friends." Soon they decided to try the bucket drop, a technique Dad had developed to deliver and retrieve items from missionaries who had no airstrip. He circled his plane overhead in tight circles while a long cord with the goods attached was reeled out behind the plane. Air friction on the basket at the end of the line would make the cord cut to the inside of the circle flown by the airplane, while the weight of the basket caused the cord to fall. When enough line was extended behind the plane, the end of the line would actually hang motionless in the air. Letting out more line at that point would make the line drop straight down where it could be made to hover just above the ground.

The Huaorani tell me that when this technique was used, they understood that the gifts were being deliberately offered and signaled their understanding and desire to continue the exchange by tying on gifts of their own. They remember receiving machetes, a metal axe (a prized possession among people who traditionally used stone axes), brightly colored ribbons, and aluminum cooking pots. In exchange, they returned a Huao comb, a feather headdress, smoked monkey, and even a live parrot, which became

my childhood pet.

After making 13 weekly gift drops, Dad located a small sandbar on the Curaray River. By flying over the sandbar and dropping small paper bags of flour at timed intervals, then repeating the process on his own airstrip at Shell Mera, he measured the sandbar to be 650 feet long. It was only about six miles from the Huaorani settlement, although by trail, it would be many, many miles of arduous trekking up and down ridges and across water. (A Huaorani moving at a fast pace could get there in three to five hours.) On January 2, 1956, Dad flew the four other men in one by one, and they set up camp on what they called "Palm Beach." They made repeated flights back and forth to the Huaorani settlement so that the people would figure out that the plane was no longer flying off into the distance but landing in their territory.

After three days of waiting on the beach, the men suddenly saw two naked women step out of the jungle onto the opposite bank. Two missionaries waded out into the river to greet them. When it was apparent the women were being well received, a man joined them on the beach. Dad's journal records that the three Huaorani seemed relaxed and acted in a friendly manner. They shared the missionaries' hamburgers and Koolaid and carried on an animated conversation as if their every word were understood. The man, whom the missionaries nicknamed "George," made it obvious that he understood the men had arrived in the ibo (Huaorani for woodbee or airplane) and he wanted a ride. Dad took him for a quick spin, which wasn't enough, and then for a second ride over his settlement, where his people saw him in the plane. Dad recorded that George got so excited that he tried to crawl out the open doorway onto the strut, apparently having no concept of how high they were or how fast they were traveling.

Late in the afternoon, Dad and Pete flew out to a friendly jungle station as usual, to avoid getting trapped by a downpour on the frequently flooding river. Shortly afterward, the younger of the two women went into the jungle as abruptly as she had appeared. Soon "George" inconspicuously followed. The older woman stayed on the beach well into the night. (When the missionaries came down from their tree house in the morning, the coals by her fire were still hot).

The next day there were no visitors, but in an overflight on January 8, Dad spotted a party of ten Huaorani on their way to the beach. (The jungle growth is too thick to be able to see the trail, so this chance spotting probably occurred as the group crossed the Tiwaeno River.) At noon, Dad radioed to my mother. "Looks like they'll be here for the Sunday afternoon service. This is it! Pray for us. Will contact you again at 4:30, over and out." As soon as 4:30 came without word from the always punctual Nate, Mom knew something was wrong and contacted the other missionary pilot. He flew over the beach the next morning, spotting the plane stripped of its canvas covering and one body in the river. Four days later a weary but tense ground party made up of missionaries, Quechua Indians, and military personnel found the other bodies, identifiable only by their watches, rings, and other personal effects.

Photos developed from film found in Dad's camera at the bottom of the river, a diary fished out of his pocket, and his watch, stopped at 3:10, seemed to be all there was to tell about the end of his life.

Many times over the years I have wondered what the end was like. When did they realize they were being attacked? Why didn't they attempt to defend themselves? What went through their minds in those last minutes before losing consciousness? They knew that they were dying on a temporary sandbar in an obscure river in unknown territory. Each surely thought about the wife he was leaving behind, who loved him and would miss him like life itself. They must have pictured the nine children among them, one still unborn, who would wonder what happened to Daddy. I imagine they felt they had failed in their objective of taking the gospel to a needy and murderous tribe, as they lay dying, bodies pierced by the wooden spears of Gikita and Nampa and Kimo and Nimonga and Mincaye and Dyuwi.

After the murders, my Aunt Rachel continued learning the Huaorani language, taking the apostle Paul's words as a personal promise. "Those who were not told will see, and those who have not heard will understand." Dayuma also believed the words Rachel taught her from the Bible and decided to return to

her people, to teach them what she had learned about God and the outside world of the cowodi. Less than three years after the massacre, Aunt Rachel and Jim Elliot's widow, Elisabeth, had made contact and were living among the tribe. There they practiced basic medicine and began to notate an oral language in hopes of someday translating the Scriptures into Huao-tidido (the Huao language).

I grew up in Quito, Ecuador, and enjoyed spending school vacations whenever I could with my Aunt Rachel among the Huaorani. Being fatherless did not make me unique there: most others had lost family in intratribal killings. Though I knew which men had killed Dad, it was not something I asked about. According to Huaorani tradition, as my father's oldest son I would be primarily responsible for avenging his death in kind, so I never wanted to appear too interested in the particulars. Even Aunt Rachel, who died last year after 37 years with the Huaorani, knew very little of the details.

But finally, last year, during my most recent journey to build a new airstrip and clinic with the Huaorani, I asked the evangelist Dyuwi how many times he had killed before he began to walk on God's trail as a young man. We were sitting outside Dayuma's house in the village of Tonampade, named after one of my childhood friends, Tona. He became the first Huao martyr, speared while trying to reach his downriver relatives with the gospel. I sat in the shade with Dyuwi and others, some of us swinging in hammocks and some squatting by an open groundfire. Children played nearby with clipped-winged birds. In a rush of stories, Dyuwi, Kimo, Dawa, Gikita, and Mincaye, all participants that day on the beach, paid me a high compliment by speaking openly of the killing. They knew that all of us have experienced God's forgiveness and that they had nothing to fear from me.

As they described their recollections, it occurred to me how incredibly unlikely it was that the Palm Beach killing took place at all; it is an anomaly that I cannot explain outside of divine intervention.

Though I was familiar with the story as we knew it from the photographs and diaries, I began to hear of a very different drama being played out within the Huao clearing. Nankiwi (the man called "George" by the missionaries) wanted to take another wife. For several reasons, the young girl's mother and brother disapproved. This made Nankiwi furious, and he began to threaten to kill the brother. Their disapproval also frustrated the young girl and she, in typical Huao fashion, made a dramatic case out of her thwarted plans, threatening, "If you won't let me marry, then why should I go on living? I'll just go to the foreigners in the ibo and let them kill me." Certainly it was no coincidence that of all the small groups of Huaorani scattered throughout their large territory, this group was the one from which Dayuma had fled, and this very girl was her sister. Being of the same stubborn stock as Dayuma, who had escaped to the fearsome "outside," she set off for Palm Beach. Nankiwi apparently saw this as an opportunity to be alone with her and took off after her. One older woman, seeing what was going on and knowing that discovery of their tryst would probably lead to killings within the group, decided to go along as chaperone.

When my father took Nankiwi for a ride, and the rest of the tribe saw him in the plane, they decided to go visit the cowodi, too. The next morning, they took the trail for Palm Beach. But before reaching the beach, they ran into Nankiwi and the girl, who were unchaperoned. Her brother, Nampa, flew into a rage and was ready to kill Nankiwi. Apparently to divert attention from his own indiscretion, Nankiwi told the group that the cowodi had attacked them and they were fleeing. Scoffing as she told me this, Dawa implied that most of the Huaorani found this hard to believe, since Nankiwi had a reputation as a troublemaker. Someone asked about the older woman; "she had to flee another way," Nankiwi lied.

As tempers flared, the oldest man, Gikita, took over. He had lived longer than any of the rest and knew better than any how savage and deceptive the outsiders were. While the group made their way back to the village, Gikita began to recount all the killings that had been committed by outsiders.

While they were sharpening spears and working up their fury, the older woman returned from the beach. When she saw the men making spears and readying themselves for an attack, she knew Nankiwi had lied

to them, and she tried to convince them that no one had been attacked. She told them the cowodi were completely friendly and meant no harm. Listening to her description of events on the beach, Gikita did not understand all that was going on, but he knew enough about the cowodi to know that they had never been friendly before, and he was determined that they should be killed.

What I find hard to explain is that killing the cowodi only made sense if they had indeed attacked the three Huaorani, since they were otherwise a wonderful resource for the greatly prized and much-needed knives, machetes, axes, and cooking pots. Yet, if they had attacked, according to Gikita's logic, they would certainly attack again, and they obviously had the superior technology of guns and an airplane. The Huaorani killed for various reasons: revenge, anger, frustration, fear. Sometimes it took very little provocation. But they always wanted two things: superiority of force and surprise. In contemplating an attack on Palm Beach, they knew they would not have a superior force. Six men with spears was hardly a match for five likely armed cowodi. If they killed the cowodi they knew they would have to burn their houses, leave their gardens, and flee as they always did after attacks, because they knew that other cowodi would come in their ibos and find them. Add to this the fact that five of the six attackers were just teenagers, not seasoned killers, and that one witness to the Friday contact insisted the cowodi were friendly. Under these circumstances, it seems hard to believe there ever was an attack; yet there was.

On Sunday afternoon, when the killers finally arrived at Palm Beach, they could see that there were five cowodi, and that they had guns. We know that the guns, which were primarily intended for protection from animals, were usually kept out of sight. The missionaries had vowed to one another before God that they would not defend themselves against human attack, even in the face of death.

Dyuwi tells me that some of the young attackers, seeing they did not easily outnumber the foreigners, got scared and asked Gikita how they could attack. Gikita said that he would first spear each of the five and then the younger men could finish the job. He sent three women over to the far side of the river to distract and separate the missionaries. This seems to have worked as planned. When two of the women showed themselves, two of the men (Jim and Pete, I imagine, since they knew the language best) waded into the river to greet them. Gikita started to rush the three left on the beach but slipped on a wet log under the leaves of the jungle floor and fell. All his spears hit the ground, making a loud noise. The men on the beach turned to see what the noise was, and the element of surprise, the second critical factor, was now also lost.

This was too much for the young attackers, and they started to flee. Gikita called them back, saying, "We came to kill them. Now let's finish it or die here ourselves." This seems at least half-heartedly to have rallied the troops. Nampa ran across the beach toward the two men in the river, spearing the larger man in the river through the torso. Kimo showed me how the cowodi began to claw at his side "like a gata monkey that has been shot with a dart." (This was probably the man trying to get his pistol out of his holster, which had a snap-down cover.) As the foreigner began shooting into the air, one of the two women in the shallow river, Nampa's mother, grabbed the foreigner's arms from behind so Nampa could spear him again. Kimo said that when the women pulled on the cowodi's arms, Nampa was grazed by a gunshot and fell down hard. According to Dawa, Nampa recovered from this wound before dying a year or so later while hunting.

Gikita says he recognized my father from the many overflights and speared him first. A second foreigner ran to help him, and Gikita speared him, too (this was most likely Ed). Mincaye said the third man on the beach ran to the airplane, partially climbed inside, and picked up something like he was going to eat it. Mincaye asked why he would do this, and as he mimicked his action, I could see he must have been picking up the microphone to report the attack. Nimonga speared him from the back, and he fell out of the plane onto the ground. When they showed me how he speared him, I knew the man must have been Roger, because that is the angle of the spear that is protruding from Roger's body as it is being towed behind the canoe in the rescue party pictures.

During the attack, the "smaller" of the two cowodi who had been crossing to greet the women rushed to a log on the far side of the river and began calling to the attackers in phrases that Kimo and Gikita say they understood to be "We just came to meet you. We aren't going to hurt you. Why are you killing us?" (This was probably Pete, who, though he was tall, was the thinner of the two men in the river when the spearing started. He also knew the language the best.)

"Why didn't he flee into the jungle?" Mincaye emphatically asked me. "If he would have fled, surely he would have lived." Instead, he just waited for Kimo to wade out and spear him.

Dawa, one of the three women, told me she had hidden in the bush through the attack, hearing but not seeing the killing of the five men. She told me she had been hit by gun pellets in the wrist and just above the knee. (These obviously came from random warning shots fired to scare the attackers, because Dawa was hiding on the far side of the narrow river and the men couldn't have known of her presence.) She also told me that after the killing she saw cowodi above the trees, singing. She didn't know what this kind of music was until she later heard records of Aunt Rachel's and became familiar with the sound of a choir.

Mincaye and Kimo confirmed that they heard the singing and saw what Dawa seems to describe as angels along the ridge above Palm Beach. Dyuwi verified hearing the strange music, though he describes what he saw more like lights, moving around and shining, a sky full of jungle beetles similar to fireflies with a light that is brighter and doesn't blink.

Apparently all the participants saw this bright multitude in the sky and felt they should be scared, because they knew it was something supernatural. Their only familiarity with the spiritual world was one of fear. (Dawa has said that this supernatural experience was what drew her to God when she later heard of him from Dayuma.)

After the killing, the Huaorani showed their customary disdain for their victims by throwing the men's bodies and their belongings in the river and stripping the plane of much of its fabric covering. When they reached their settlement, they burned their houses and fled into the jungle, fearing the retribution from the outside they were sure would come.

As they repeatedly discussed the raid, one inexplicable question haunted the Huaorani: why hadn't the cowodi used their guns to defend themselves? If Nampa and Dawa had not been wounded, the answer would have been quite simple: either the men didn't really have guns, or the guns didn't work. After the adrenalin rush of any frightening event, it is easy to question what we think we saw or heard. But the Huaorani were certain that the superficial wounds were unintended, since Nampa was hit only after his mother grabbed the cowodi's arms and Dawa knew no one saw where she was hiding.

These wounds, actual evidence that the mission-aries were capable of defending themselves and chose not to, were a major factor in the Huaorani men agreeing to allow Aunt Rachel and

Elisabeth Elliot to come live with them. They had to know the answer: why would the cowodi let themselves be killed rather than kill, as any normal Huaorani would have done? This question dogged Gikita until he heard the full story of why the men wanted to make contact and about another man, Jesus, who freely allowed his own death to benefit all people.

Forty years ago, Gikita was an unusually old man in a tribe that killed friends and relatives with the same zeal and greater frequency than they did their enemies. Now he is nearing 80 years of age and has seen his grandchildren and great-grandchildren grow up without the constant fear of spearings. He has repeatedly asserted that all he wants to do is go to heaven and live peacefully with the five men who came to tell him about Wangongi, creator God.

My father and his four friends were not given the privilege of watching their children and grandchildren grow up. I've often wished I could have known my dad as an adult, for Mom and Aunt Rachel have often said our thought process and mannerisms are much alike. I have trouble distinguishing what I actually "remember" of him and what I have been told. But I do know that he left me a legacy, and the challenge now is for me to pass it on to my children. Dad strove to find out what life really is. He found identity, purpose, and fulfillment in being obedient to God's call. He tried it, tested it, and committed himself to it. I know that the risk he took, which resulted in his death and consequently his separation from his family, he took not to satisfy his own need for adventure or fame, but in obedience to what he believed was God's directive to him. I suppose he is best known because he died for his faith, but the legacy he left his children was his willingness first to live for his faith.

God took five common young men of uncommon commitment and used them for his own glory. They never had the privilege they so enthusiastically pursued to tell the Huaorani of the God they loved and served. But for every Huaorani who today follows God's trail through the efforts of others, there are a thousand cowodi who follow God's trail more resolutely because of their example. This success withheld from them in life God multiplied and continues to multiply as a memorial to their obedience and his faithfulness.

Steve Saint moved in 1995 to Ecuador with his wife and children to work with the Huaorani people to build an airport and a hospital. This article appears as a chapter in Martyrs: Contemporary Writers on Modern Lives of Faith, edited by Susan Bergman (Harper San Francisco).

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