

five missionaries working in five Central American countries, and despite setbacks, the work continued to grow, with some three hundred missionaries serving in six Central American countries and Mexico by the late twentieth century.



[Jim Elliot and Operation Auca](#)

Although Scofield's concern was specifically for Central America, all of Latin America had been passed over by Protestant missions. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, there was a growing awareness of this oversight. *The Neglected Continent*, a book by Lucy Guinness, underscored the "spiritual neglect of South America" and helped awaken many Christians to their responsibility. It is estimated that in 1900 there were only fifty thousand evangelical Christians in all of Latin America, a figure that increased nearly a hundredfold in the fifty years that followed and numbered tens of millions by the late

twentieth century. “Nowhere,” writes Kane, “has Christianity grown so rapidly in the twentieth century.”³²

The primary reason that Protestants passed over this region, according to Harold Cook, was the “violent Roman Catholic opposition” that “made Protestant missions to Latin America unattractive if not impossible.” Another factor, he suggests, was that Latin America “lacked the glamour that was somehow attached to areas like the Orient, Africa or the South Seas.” Likewise, some of the leaders of Protestant mission societies argued that Latin America was nominally Christian, so Protestant activity in that area could not properly be classified as missions in the same sense as the work in India, China, and Africa. This was particularly true of some of the delegates at the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910.³³ It was also true of some of the “faith” mission leaders whose prime concern was to reach inland frontiers where Christ had not even been named.

But if certain individual mission societies hesitated to enter Latin America, most mainline denominational societies and newer “faith missions”—especially those founded around the turn of the century—had no such compunctions. They moved into the region “with the express purpose of ‘converting’ Roman Catholics.” Historically, writes Stephen Neill, “American Protestants, unlike most other Christians, have never had any hesitation over proselytizing work in nominally Roman Catholic countries, and treat such efforts as ‘missions’ without distinction from missions in non-Christian countries.”³⁴ Most of the people living in Latin America, particularly the native Indians, were Roman Catholic in name only and had not had even minimal instruction in the faith.

Many of the new missions focused on the native peoples. The South American Indian Mission, the Andes Evangelical Mission, Wycliffe Bible Translators, and New Tribes Mission were all founded for the purpose of reaching these people, of whom Charles Darwin wrote, “One can hardly make one’s self believe that they are fellow creatures.”³⁵ To the missionaries, however, there was no difficulty in believing that they were fellow creatures and far more—priceless souls for whom Christ died. For this, missionaries were willing to risk their lives—including Jim Elliot and four other young men who were killed by the Auca Indians of Ecuador in 1956. The tragedy became the missionary headlines of the century, with magazine covers, books, and a film all reporting the details.

The most stunning aspect of this incredible story is that it was a virtual repeat of a tragedy that had occurred a decade earlier in Bolivia when Cecil Dye, his brother Bob Dye, and their three companions, all with New Tribes Mission, entered the jungle in an effort to open the way for mission work among the *bárbaro*. This was a tribe, they were told, that “uses short arrows with such deadly effect that even the neighboring tribes ... are terrified of them.” Others who heard of the missionaries’ plans also warned of danger: “They ... attack any civilized person who comes near them”; “impossible to tame”; “you won’t come back alive”; “they’ll club their victims in their hammocks at night.” But the determined party refused to be dissuaded. “God had called them to reach this so-called ‘hardest tribe’ first.” “Of course it is risky going to them,” wrote George Hosback, the youngest member of the team, “but didn’t God stop the mouths of lions by His angels ... and is He not ‘the same yesterday, today and forever’?”³⁶

After the men entered the jungle by foot, they were never heard from again, although early in 1944, months after they departed, items belonging to them were found by a second search party. During the years that followed, rumors surfaced periodically about the men—one in 1946 reporting that they had emerged from the jungle in a remote area of Brazil. “We wondered,” wrote Jean Dye, “how much more we could bear of these waves of hope—raised only to be dashed.”

In the meantime, the wives of the missing men remained in Bolivia “more determined than ever to win these souls to Christ”³⁷

In August of 1947 the first real breakthrough with the Ayorés occurred. The painstaking work of Joe Moreno, a self-described “flunky” missionary not chosen for the team, had paid off. He had inquired about Ayoré customs and began leaving gifts in their abandoned camps near the perimeter of their territory. Eventually, native men followed the gifts to the settlement where the missionaries were stationed; and as more time passed, the missionaries learned the language and presented the gospel to them. It was not until 1949 that the wives learned conclusively that their husbands had been killed.

That such a tragedy as this could recur in such similar circumstances a decade later illustrates how truly independent many twentieth-century faith missionaries had become, and it also shows the degree of cooperation that existed among missionaries from different evangelical mission societies. Operation Auca, which claimed the lives of five young men, was not a project designed by a mission society. Rather, it was a hastily drawn-up plan devised by members of three different missions with virtually no consultation with their leaders or with senior missionaries on the field. They were “faith” missionaries operating “by faith,” depending on God for direction.

That is not to suggest, however, that they ignored pertinent data relating to the Indians and the experience of other missionaries. Indeed, as they planned the contact with the Aucas, they pored over the details of the New Tribes tragedy in Bolivia the previous decade, noting with grave interest their mistakes and vowing not to fall into any of the same traps themselves.

The five missionaries involved in Operation Auca were all what might be termed junior missionaries. Nate Saint, a pilot working under Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF), was the most experienced, having served in Ecuador for seven years. The others had only two or three years of experience each. Roger Youderian was serving with the Gospel Missionary Union; and Jim Elliot, Pete Fleming, and Ed McCully were with Christian Missions in Many Lands, an organization with ties to the Plymouth Brethren. This organization channeled money to some thirteen hundred missionaries, though it claimed it was “not a mission board, nor . . . in any way a mission society.” It encouraged its missionaries to “depend directly on the Lord for guidance in their work,” reminding them that they were not “answerable to any mission board—only to God”—an approach that opened the way for such a project as Operation Auca.

Operation Auca was born in the Ecuadorian jungle in the fall of 1955 in an effort to reach one of the most hostile Indian tribes in all of South America with the gospel. For centuries the Aucas, like the Ayorés in Bolivia, had been the subject of hair-raising stories. “Spanish conquistadors, Catholic priests, rubber hunters, oil drillers—all had been targets of Auca spears. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, had been killed. No outsider had ever been able to live in Auca territory”—so said Dave Cooper, a veteran missionary to Ecuador. The most recent publicized killings by the Aucas had occurred in 1943, when eight Shell Oil employees lost their lives at the hands of this most unfriendly tribe. These very accounts held a certain fascination for the five young missionaries. What a glorious victory it would be if such a tribe could be converted to Christianity!

Jim Elliot had graduated from Wheaton College in 1949 and was preparing for missionary service in Ecuador. His single-minded enthusiasm to reach South American Indians deeply influenced Pete Fleming, a graduate of the University of Washington. In 1952 they left together for Ecuador, both still single, though that would soon change.

Also arriving in Ecuador that year was Ed McCully, with his wife Marilou. He, like Elliot, was a graduate of Wheaton College, where he had been a star football player. Also a Wheaton alumnus was Nate Saint, who, with his wife Marj, had served in Ecuador since 1948. Roger Youderian, a World War II paratrooper and graduate of Northwestern College in Minneapolis, was the most recent arrival, coming in 1953 with his wife Barbara and infant daughter.

Although Youderian was an enthusiastic participant in Operation Auca, his brief tenure as a missionary working among the headhunting Jivaros had not been a satisfying time, and he had been on the verge of giving up and going home. “There is no ministry for me among the Jivaros or the Spanish,” he had written in his diary, “and I’m not going to try to fool myself. I wouldn’t support a missionary such as I know myself to be, and I’m not going to ask anyone else to. Three years is long enough to learn a lesson and learn it well ... the failure is mine.... This is my personal ‘Waterloo’ as a missionary.”³⁸

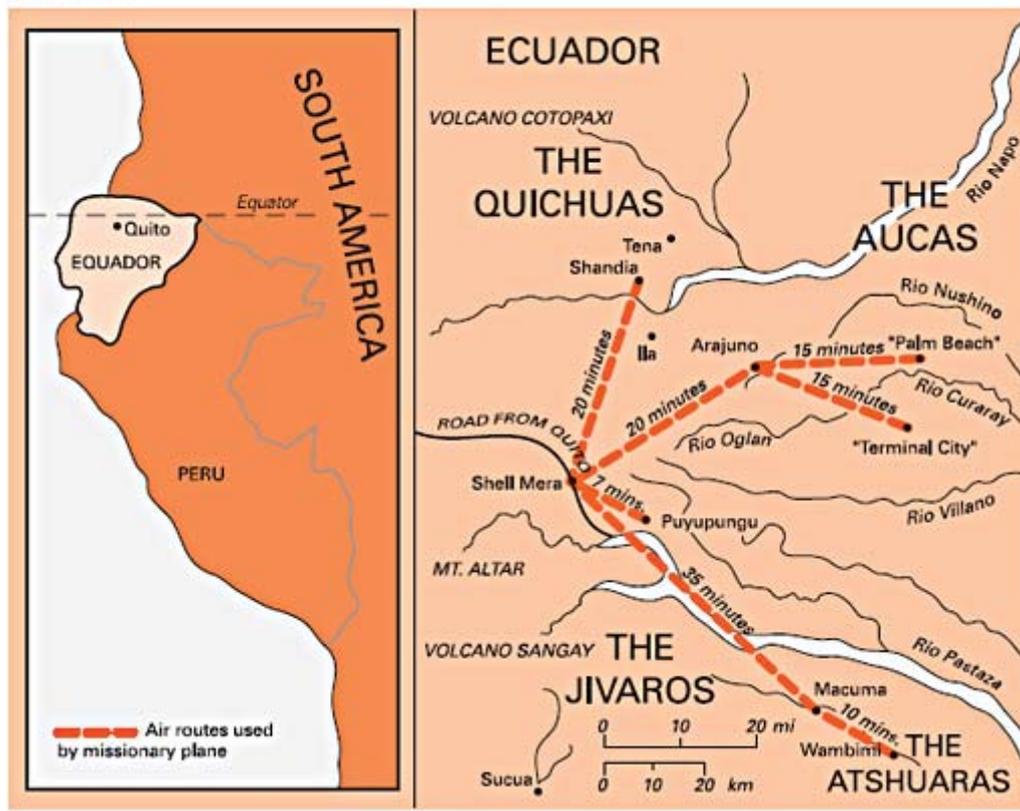
But Operation Auca changed all that. The excitement of being involved in what was hoped to be one of the great missionary breakthroughs in modern history brought new life into his missionary work. For the others too, Operation Auca provided, in the words of Nate Saint, “high adventure, as unreal as any successful novel,”³⁹ a welcome change in the midst of routine missionary work. Though Jim, Pete, and Ed had been invited by Chief Atanasio to come and teach his tribe of Quichuas, it was the fearsome Aucas that captured their imaginations.

The dream of reaching the Aucas had been in the minds of the missionaries for years. Ever since Nate had arrived in Ecuador and heard stories of them, he had dreamed of one day sharing the gospel with them. Pete and Jim had also been deeply burdened for them. In December of 1953 Pete wrote of this burden in his diary:

Last night with Nate and Cliff [a visitor from the States] we talked a long time about the Auca problem. It is a grave and solemn one; an unreachable people who murder and kill with a hatred which causes them to mutilate the bodies of their victims. It came to me strongly then that God is leading me to do something about it ... I know that this may be the most important decision of my life but I have a quiet peace about it. Strangely enough I do not feel my coming marriage as prohibiting myself from being eligible for this service.⁴⁰

The first breakthrough came nearly two years later, on September 19, 1955. As Nate Saint flew over Auca territory in his single-engine Piper Cruiser, he spotted for the first time an Auca village. In the weeks that followed, regular visits to the “neighbors” began. As he was at the controls, one of the other missionaries would drop gifts (including machetes, knives, clothing, and life-sized pictures of themselves) and shout friendly Auca greetings learned from Dayuma, an Auca woman living outside the tribe. On one occasion while circling above, Nate used a rope to lower a bucket containing gifts, and he was excited to pull it back up filled with gifts from the Aucas—a live parrot, peanuts, and a smoked monkey tail. This response was taken as a genuine sign of friendship.

The speed with which the missionaries moved forward in this dangerous undertaking, and the secrecy that surrounded it, have in the years since been the most controversial aspects of the effort. “The whole project,” wrote Ed McCully to Jim Elliot, “is moving faster than we had originally dared to hope.” But why such haste? “The reason for the urgency,” wrote Nate Saint, “is the Brethren boys feel that it is time now to move.” Presumably he was referring only to Jim and Ed, as Pete Fleming had warned against moving ahead quickly—especially before they had a better command of the language. Jim, who was “always quick to make decisions,” was described as “chewing the bit,” while Nate was cautioning that nothing be done suddenly, allowing each advance to “soak in” before another step was taken. Yet less than three months after the first gift drop, the men had landed in the midst of Auca territory.⁴¹



But if speed was a top priority, secrecy was even more so. A code system was developed so that the missionaries could communicate over short-wave radio without their plan being discovered. They themselves were sworn to secrecy. No one other than their wives and Johnny Keenan, an MAF pilot who would provide backup support should they need it, was to know. Nate Saint wrote to his family back home requesting special prayer, hinting at what was underway, but couching even the vaguest clues in such phrases as “do not mention,” “CONFIDENTIAL,” “guard your talk,” and “tell no one.”⁴²

The reason for the strict secrecy, according to James Hefley, was that “they feared that if word got out, a horde of journalists, adventurers, and curiosity seekers would make contact impossible.” But the veil of secrecy extended to others who could be trusted and who could have given invaluable assistance. Frank Drown, with twelve years experience among the Indians, was not told of the venture until the plans had been finalized.

Another key individual left out of the planning was Rachel Saint, Nate’s sister, who had spent months studying the Auca language with Dayuma, who had fled from her people. Rachel hoped to reach them with the gospel herself, but she knew the necessity of extreme caution. From Dayuma she had been warned: “Never trust them.... They may appear friendly and then they will turn around and kill.”⁴³ Such warnings were probably not what Jim Elliot wanted to hear, nor did he want to risk her reporting their planned venture to her supervisors at Wycliffe.

Certainly the five missionaries were aware of the danger, but they were convinced that no risk was too great to take for God. “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose,” was Jim Elliot’s motto; and he solemnly vowed that he was “ready to die for the salvation of the Auca.”⁴⁴ They were all looking to God for guidance, and they saw signs of what they viewed to be God’s direct intervention. The Curaray River, for example, seemed to shrink from its banks, providing a beach airstrip at a time when the beach normally would have been flooded.

Nevertheless, there was great trepidation as the time approached for the landing in Auca territory. Aside from the fierce nature of the Aucas, there were other serious safety factors to consider, particularly concerning the landing and takeoff from the short sandy beach along the river. Nate Saint was a skilled pilot, but he knew all too well that a sandy beach was not the same as a packed dirt airstrip. This awesome responsibility kept him awake most of the night on January 2, 1956.

The alarm clocks rang before 6:00 A.M. on Tuesday, January 3, and the adrenaline was flowing as the men began dressing. For Olive Fleming, married to Pete for only a year and a half, it had been a “rough night.” Her apprehension could not be disguised. Jim Elliot had initially advised against Pete’s going since it would mean risking the lives of three of the four male missionaries who knew the Quichua language, but by late December the consensus of opinion seemed to have changed. On December 27, Pete wrote in his diary: “It was decided that perhaps I ought to prepare to go on the expedition in order to gain by numbers more relative security for all.”⁴⁵ The decision was made that Pete should fly out with Nate each night. Reports of previous Auca attacks indicated they invariably struck during the predawn hours.

The plan called for Nate Saint to make several trips to Palm Beach (the name designating a sandy shoreline along the Curaray River), ferrying the missionaries and equipment in. The first landing and takeoff were crucial: “As we came in ... we slipped down between the trees in a steep side slip.... As the weight settled on the wheels I felt it was soft sand—too late to back out now. I hugged the stick back and waited. One softer spot and we’d have been on our nose—maybe our back. It never came.” On takeoff, after leaving Ed alone on the beach, “the sand really grabbed the wheels,” but within seconds Nate was airborne and on his way back to the base to begin his second trip.⁴⁶

January 3 was a busy day on Palm Beach as Nate ferried in the missionaries and equipment. By nightfall the men had constructed a tree house, and three of them slept there while Nate and Pete flew back to the base at Arajuno to spend the night. They returned the following morning and spent a relaxing uneventful day with the other three on the beach before flying out again in the late afternoon. Thursday was much the same. Then on Friday, things began to happen. At 11:15 A.M., three naked Aucas (two women and a man) suddenly appeared out of the jungle from across the river. Jim waded out to meet them, and a friendly exchange took place. They accepted gifts and appeared to be at ease with their hosts. That night the Auca visitors departed, and Saturday was another uneventful day.

By Sunday the missionaries were restless and anxious for something to happen, wondering if their visitors had forgotten them. Nate decided to fly over the Auca village, which appeared deserted. On the way back he spotted a band of Aucas “en route” to Palm Beach. “That’s it, guys! They’re on the way,” he shouted as he touched down on the beach. The missionaries waited. At 12:30 P.M. Nate made his scheduled radio contact with Marj at Shell Mera, promising to contact her again at 4:30.

The 4:30 contact never came. Nate’s watch (later found smashed against a stone) had stopped ticking at 3:12 P.M. But Marj refused to believe the worst. Perhaps the radio transmitters had broken down. It was a sleepless night as she prayed and thought of the unthinkable. Early the next morning Johnny Keenan was in the air flying over Palm Beach. His report back to Marj was grim—a report that Marj relayed on to Elisabeth Elliot: “Johnny had found the plane on the beach. All the fabric is stripped off. There is no sign of the fellows.”⁴⁷

“Suddenly, the secrecy barrier was down,” writes Russell Hitt. Word spread rapidly. Missionaries and government officials organized a search party. A *Time* magazine correspondent and a *Life* magazine photographer were dispatched to the scene. The story was on news wires, and people around the world waited for news. On Wednesday afternoon two bodies were sighted from the air, and on Friday the ground search team

reached the site. “The missionaries in the ground party,” according to Hefley, “pulled four badly deteriorated bodies from the river. Some still had palm wood spears sticking through their clothing. From personal belongings, they identified Jim, Pete, Rog, and Nate. Ed McCully’s body apparently had been washed away.” It was a somber scene. “The darkening sky indicated a jungle storm would soon be upon them. Hurriedly, the missionaries dug a shallow grave. As the rain came down in sheets, Frank Drown offered a quick committal prayer.”⁴⁸

At Shell Mera the five widows congregated to hear the grim details. Ahead of them was the task of putting their lives back together. For the stoical Elisabeth Elliot, there were “no regrets.” It was God’s will. “This was not a tragedy . . . God has a plan and purpose in all things.”⁴⁹ For Olive, who was left alone with no children, the trauma might have been unbearable. During her brief marriage she had endured the strain of two miscarriages and now the tragic death of her husband. But the very Bible passages she and Pete had been reading together before his death became her strength during this time of desperation, especially 2 Corinthians 5:5: “He who has prepared us for this very thing is God.”

As with the slaying of the five missionaries in Bolivia in the previous decade, the public response was mixed. From everywhere came an outpouring of sympathy for the families; and many Christians, on seeing the commitment of these five, dedicated themselves to God and to missionary service. But to others the incident was “a tragic waste” of young lives.

Despite the trauma that ended Operation Auca, the Aucas themselves were not forgotten. MAF pilots resumed the gift drops, and Rachel Saint continued her study of the Auca language. But no more dramatic entries into Auca territory were planned. The effort proceeded with caution, and after nearly two years, some of the Aucas slowly began to make overtures to others outside their tribe. Then, in September of 1958, Dayuma returned to her tribe with two Auca women, and three weeks later they reappeared and invited Rachel Saint and Elisabeth Elliot to visit them. So began mission work with the Aucas. There were no newsmen or photographers to record the breakthrough, for there was nothing to record except that two women were once again venturing into the jungle to preach the gospel—routine missionary work.

In the aftermath of the tragedy there were many theories put forth as to why the Aucas killed the five missionaries—for example, that internal issues among the Aucas were contributing factors. Perhaps so. But the overriding factor was that the Aucas were territorial people. Outsiders entering their territory were considered enemies. To protect their families, by the dictates of their worldview, they had no choice but to eliminate their adversaries. The missionaries failed to appreciate and recognize that worldview.

“For those who saw it as a great Christian martyr story,” Elisabeth Elliot later reflected, “the outcome was beautifully predictable. All puzzles would be solved. God would vindicate Himself. Aucas would be converted and we could all ‘feel good’ about our faith.” But that is not what happened. “The truth is that not by any means did all subsequent events work out as hoped. There were negative effects of the missionaries’ entrance into Auca territory. There were arguments and misunderstandings and a few really terrible things, along with the answers to prayer.”⁵⁰

Eliza Davis George and the Elizabeth Native Interior Mission

While many faith missions such as the Sudan Interior Mission, the Africa Inland Mission, the Christian and Missionary Alliance, New Tribes Mission, and Christian Missions in Many Lands grew rapidly during the course of the twentieth century, each sponsoring hundreds of missionaries, others remained small and obscure, though not