

fact, the focus was on safety and evacuation of mission personnel when life was in danger—sometimes leaving national Christians at a greater risk. But mission agencies drew the line at paying ransoms to free missionaries, reasoning that if by kidnapping, terrorists could reap financial rewards, they would be more likely to repeat their actions. This matter of paying a ransom was broached when Betty and John Stam were taken hostage in 1934 and would arise again and again in the decades that followed.

In 2003, after Martin and Gracia Burnham, of New Tribes Mission, were taken hostage in the Philippines, the matter came to a head with a *Christianity Today* cover-story entitled, “Did Martin Die Needlessly?” “Gracia Burnham is unapologetic in her support of ransom payments to free hostages,” writes Ted Olsen. To those who would argue that ransom risks the lives of other missionaries, her response was that they would feel the same way she did if they experienced what she had. Nor did she express concern about the fear that “blood money” would be used for evil purposes. She quoted her husband’s rationale: “If we can trust the Lord for a million dollar [ransom], which is something totally beyond our reach, we can trust the Lord that the million dollars never buys a weapon or blows anybody up.”<sup>4</sup>

The case of the Burnhams that drew wide media coverage might imply that religious persecution and martyrdom is so rare that it makes headlines. However, Paul Marshall strongly argues otherwise. His book *Their Blood Cries Out* focuses primarily on the unnamed believers who live in regions where religious freedom is unknown:

This book is about a spiritual plague. It tells of massacre, rape, torture, slavery, beatings, mutilations, and imprisonment. It also tells of the pervasive patterns of extortion, harassment, family division, and crippling discrimination in employment and education. This plague affects over two hundred million people, with an additional four hundred million suffering from discrimination and legal impediments.<sup>5</sup>

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## **Betty and John Stam and China Martyrs**

During the years following the Boxer uprising, China was anything but free from hostility toward foreigners. Missionaries were viewed with the deepest suspicion, even though their work was largely humanitarian in nature. They were blamed for spreading a cholera epidemic that swept across the northern provinces in 1902, and as a result, two CIM missionaries were killed by a mob. Another brutal attack against missionaries occurred near Hong Kong in 1905 and resulted in five deaths, including that of the greatly loved Dr. Eleanor Chestnut.

After coming to China in 1893 under the American Presbyterian Board, Chestnut built a hospital, using her own money to buy the bricks. Even before the hospital was completed, she was performing surgery—in her own bathroom for want of a better place. One such operation involved the amputation of a coolie’s leg. Complications arose and skin grafts were needed. Later, the doctor was questioned about a leg problem from which she herself was suffering. “Oh, it’s nothing,” she answered, brushing off the inquiry. But a nurse revealed that the skin graft for the “good-for-nothing coolie” had come from Dr. Chestnut’s own leg while using only a local anesthetic.<sup>6</sup>

During the Boxer Rebellion, Dr. Chestnut remained on her post longer than most missionaries, and she returned the following year. Then in 1905, while she was busy working at the hospital with four other missionaries, a mob stormed the building. Although she escaped in time to alert authorities, she returned to the scene to help rescue her colleagues. It was too late. Her colleagues had been slain. But there were others who needed her help. Her final act of service to the Chinese people whom she so loved was to

rip a piece of material from her own dress to bandage the forehead of a child who had been wounded.

Despite such incidents, the early years of the twentieth century in China were relatively peaceful ones during which the Christian community greatly expanded. By the 1920s, though, the Chinese political scene was in chaos. Sun Yat-sen's authority was being challenged on every side. There were more than a dozen "governments" centered in various cities, and military factions ruled the countryside. In 1925 Sun Yat-sen died, and the fate of foreigners in China became more tenuous than ever. The Communists, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, were gaining influence, and several missionaries were killed as a result of apparent Communist instigation. The situation only seemed to worsen when Chiang Kai-shek arose as an opposition leader. By 1927 his southern armies were sweeping across China, leaving thousands dead in the wake. Missionaries were ordered out, and during 1927 alone some fifty percent of all foreign missionaries in China left, never to return again.

It would seem that such chaotic political turmoil would have resulted in a curtailment of missionary work for the CIM, but to the contrary, "just when the general situation was at its worst in 1929, Hoste [the general director] telegraphed to the home countries an appeal for 200 workers (the majority to be men) in the next two years." The goal was met numerically and on schedule, but "disappointingly, only eighty-four were men."<sup>7</sup> Despite the dangers they knew lay ahead, young women eagerly volunteered. Among them was Betty Scott, a graduate of Moody Bible Institute and the daughter of Presbyterian missionaries to China.

While at Moody, Scott had attended the CIM weekly prayer meetings, and there she became acquainted with John Stam, who also was prepared to volunteer to be one of the two hundred called for. But although Betty and John were attracted to each other and their future ambitions were pointing in the same direction, a personal desire for marriage was seen as secondary. To his father John wrote:

Betty knows that, in all fairness and love to her, I cannot ask her to enter into an engagement with years to wait.... The China Inland Mission has appealed for men, single men, to itinerate in sections where it would be almost impossible to take a woman, until more settled work has been commenced.... Some time ago I promised the Lord that, if fitted for this forward movement, I would gladly go into it, so now I cannot back down without sufficient reason, merely upon personal considerations.<sup>8</sup>

In the fall of 1931 Betty sailed for China, while John remained at Moody to complete his senior year. As the class speaker for his graduation ceremony, he was well aware of the depressed American economy and the political crises abroad. Yet he challenged his fellow students to go forward with the task of world evangelism:

Shall we beat a retreat, and turn back from our high calling in Christ Jesus; or dare we advance at God's command, in the face of the impossible?... Let us remind ourselves that the Great Commission was never qualified by clauses calling for advance only if funds were plentiful and [there is] no hardship or self-denial involved. On the contrary, we are told to expect tribulation and even persecution, but with it victory in Christ.<sup>9</sup>

There was reason to expect persecution. The situation in China remained grim. There were many acts of violence against missionaries in 1932, though none more shocking than the killing of eleven missionaries in Sian serving under the Scandinavian Alliance Mission (now TEAM).

Following his graduation in the fall of 1932, John Stam sailed for China, not expecting to see Betty. Just before he arrived in China, however, she had returned to Shanghai for medical reasons, and their reunion resulted in their engagement. A year later they were married at the home of Betty's parents in Tsi-nan, and during the year that followed, they continued their language study while serving at the CIM mission compound in Süancheng.

In September of 1934, Betty gave birth to a baby girl, Helen Priscilla, and that fall they were assigned to a station in the province of Anhwei where missionaries had been evacuated two years earlier. Communist activity, they were told, had diminished, and the local magistrate personally guaranteed their safety, assuring them that there was "no danger of Communists" in the area.<sup>10</sup> CIM officials, anxious to reopen the station, were also convinced that the area was reasonably safe. But both the Chinese and the CIM officials had seriously misjudged the situation. The Stams arrived at the end of November, and before the first week of December had passed, they had been attacked in their home by Communist soldiers. Though placed under heavy guard, John was permitted to send a letter to his superiors:

Tsingteh, An.  
Dec. 6, 1934

China Inland Mission,  
Shanghai.

Dear Brethren,

My wife, baby and myself are today in the hands of the Communists, in the city of Tsingteh. Their demand is twenty thousand dollars for our release.

All our possessions and stores are in their hands, but we praise God for peace in our hearts and a meal tonight. God grant you wisdom in what you do, and us fortitude, courage and peace of heart. He is able—and a wonderful Friend in such a time.

Things happened so quickly this a.m. They were in the city just a few hours after the ever-persistent rumors really became alarming, so that we could not prepare to leave in time. We were just too late.

The Lord bless and guide you, and as for us, may God be glorified whether by life or by death.

In Him,  
John C. Stam<sup>11</sup>

The day after the letter was written, the Stams were forced to make a grueling march to another town. Not only were their own lives at stake, but they could overhear their guards discussing plans to kill their baby girl to avoid the bother of bringing her along. Little Helen's life was spared, but no such fortune awaited them. After they arrived at their destination, they were stripped of their outer clothes, paraded through the streets, and publicly ridiculed while the communist guerrilla leaders urged the townspeople to come out in full force to view the execution.

A week after the execution, baby Helen was delivered in a rice basket to the home of another missionary family a hundred miles across the dangerous mountain terrain. A Chinese evangelist had found her abandoned in a house some thirty hours after the execution and took the responsibility of bringing her to safety.

The execution of the Stams was a distressing blow to the CIM, but many young people, inspired by their sacrifice, dedicated their lives to missions, and the year 1935 saw the greatest amount of money come into the mission since the stock market crash in 1929.

There were other missionary martyrs in China in the years that followed. Among them was John Birch, a man whose tireless work as a missionary has long been lost to the

political society that was named after him. Birch began his missionary career in Hangchow under a Baptist mission organization in 1940 when China was at war on all fronts with the Japanese invaders. Almost immediately he was recognized for his courage as he traveled about the war-torn countryside, “slipping through Japanese occupation lines and preaching in villages where missionaries had not dared to go since the war began.”<sup>12</sup> Later he became involved in evacuating missionaries and Chinese evangelists from the war zone, conducting a one-man rescue operation that defied all risks, bringing out as many as sixty at a time. Following the war, he remained in China despite the growing threat of communist guerillas. He continued his widespread evangelistic activity, knowing full well the risks, and it was on one such trip north that he was ambushed and killed by communist forces.



*John and Betty Stam, martyred in China in 1934.*

Another well-known name inscribed on the missionary death registry for China was Eric Liddell, the great Olympic athlete of 1924 whose story was portrayed in the award-winning film *Chariots of Fire*. Liddell grew up in China, the son of missionaries, and in 1925, only a year after his momentous Olympic victory, he returned to serve as a missionary in his own right. His ministry there spanned the period of the Sino-Japanese War, and he and his family knew firsthand the hardships and danger of missionary life. With the outbreak of World War II the political situation in China worsened, and in 1941 Liddell decided to send his wife and two children to his wife’s home in Canada until the worst of the dangers was over. Later that year, along with six other members of the London Missionary Society, he was placed under house arrest by the Japanese, and there he remained until his death early in 1945.

Though Liddell’s death was not a direct result of his imprisonment, the malnutrition and lack of adequate medical care may have contributed to it. After an extended illness and what was thought to be a nervous breakdown, later complicated by a stroke, he died. The autopsy report, however, revealed that he had suffered from a massive hemorrhage on the brain caused by a tumor. His sudden death came as a shock to his family and friends and to his fans the world over, but it was also a testimony of the sacrifice of a man who had so consistently put his faith in God above personal ambition and fame.

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### **Paul Carlson and the Congo Martyrs**

Not since the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 had so many missionaries been killed in a single year as in the Simba Rebellion in 1964 and 1965. The terror unleashed on innocent Congolese Christians and Western missionaries left thousands dead and even more to suffer from physical and emotional scars that would stay with them the rest of their lives. Dr.