

= Operation Auca =

Operation Auca was an attempt by five Evangelical Christian missionaries from the United States to bring Christianity to the Huaorani people of the rain forest of Ecuador . The Huaorani , also known by the pejorative Aucas (a modification of awqa , the Quechua word for " savages ") , were an isolated tribe known for their violence , against both their own people and outsiders who entered their territory . With the intention of being the first Christians to evangelize the previously uncontacted Huaorani , the missionaries began making regular flights over Huaorani settlements in September 1955 , dropping gifts , which were reciprocated . After several months of exchanging gifts , on January 3 , 1956 , the missionaries established a camp at " Palm Beach " , a sandbar along the Curaray River , a few kilometers from Huaorani settlements . Their efforts came to an end on January 8 , 1956 , when all five ? Jim Elliot , Nate Saint , Ed McCully , Peter Fleming , and Roger Youderian ? were attacked and speared by a group of Huaorani warriors . The news of their deaths was broadcast around the world , and Life magazine covered the event with a photo essay .

The deaths of the men galvanized the missionary effort in the United States , sparking an outpouring of funding for evangelization efforts around the world . Their work is still frequently remembered in evangelical publications , and in 2006 was the subject of the film production End of the Spear . Several years after the death of the men , the widow of Jim Elliot , Elisabeth , and the sister of Nate Saint , Rachel , returned to Ecuador as missionaries with the Summer Institute of Linguistics (now SIL International) to live among the Huaorani . This eventually led to the conversion of many , including some of those involved in the killing . While largely eliminating tribal violence , their efforts exposed the tribe to increased influence from the outside .

= = Huaorani = =

The Huaorani around the time of Operation Auca were a small tribe occupying the jungle of Eastern Ecuador between the Napo and Curaray Rivers , an area of approximately 20 @, @ 000 square kilometers (7 @, @ 700 mi ²) . They numbered approximately 600 people , and were split into three groups , all mutually hostile ? the Geketaidi , the Baïidi , and the Wepeidi . They lived on the gathering and cultivation of plant foods like manioc and plantains , as well as fishing and hunting with spear and blowgun . Family units consisted of a man and his wife or wives , their unmarried sons , their married daughters and sons @-@ in @-@ law , and their grandchildren . All of them would reside in a longhouse , which was separated by several kilometers from another longhouse in which close relatives lived . Marriage was always endogenous and typically between cousins , and arranged by the parents of the young people .

Before their first peaceful contact with outsiders (cowodi) in 1958 , the Huaorani fiercely defended their territory . Viewing all cowodi as cannibalistic predators , they killed rubber tappers around the turn of the 20th century and Shell Oil Company employees during the 1940s , in addition to any lowland Quechua or other outsiders who encroached on their land . Furthermore , they were prone to internal violence , often engaging in vengeance killing of other Huaorani . Raids were carried out in extreme anger by groups of men who attacked their victims ' longhouse by night and then fled . Attempts to build truces through gifts and exchange of spouses became more frequent as their numbers decreased and the tribes fragmented , but the cycle of violence continued .

= = Missionaries = =

Jim Elliot first heard of the Huaorani in 1950 from a former missionary to Ecuador , and afterwards indicated that God had called him to Ecuador to evangelize the Huaorani . He began corresponding with his friend Pete Fleming about his desire to minister in Ecuador , and in 1952 the two men set sail for Guayaquil as missionaries with the Plymouth Brethren . For six months they lived in Quito with the goal of learning Spanish . They then moved to Shandia , a Quechua mission station deep in the Ecuadorian jungle . There they worked under the supervision of a Christian Missions in Many Lands missionary , Wilfred Tidmarsh , and began exposing themselves to the culture and studying

the Quechua language .

Another team member was Ed McCully , a man Jim Elliot had met and befriended while both attended Wheaton College . Following graduation , he married Marilou Hobolth and enrolled in a one @-@ year basic medical treatment program at the School of Missionary Medicine in Los Angeles . On December 10 , 1952 , McCully moved to Quito with his family as a Plymouth Brethren missionary , planning to soon join Elliot and Fleming in Shandia . In 1953 , however , the station in Shandia was wiped out by a flood , delaying their move until September of that year .

The team 's pilot , Nate Saint , had served in the military during World War II , receiving flight training as a member of the Army Air Corps . After being discharged in 1946 , he too studied at Wheaton College , but quit after a year and joined the Mission Aviation Fellowship in 1948 . He and his wife Marj traveled to Ecuador by the end of the year , and they settled at MAF headquarters in Shell Mera . Shortly after his arrival , Saint began transporting supplies and equipment to missionaries spread throughout the jungle . This work ultimately led to his meeting the other four missionaries , who he joined in Operation Auca .

Also on the team was Roger Youderian , a 32 @-@ year @-@ old missionary who had been working in Ecuador since 1953 . Under the mission board Gospel Missionary Union , he and his wife Barbara and daughter Beth settled in Macuma , a mission station in the southern jungle of Ecuador . There , he and his wife ministered to the Shuar people , learning their language and transcribing it . After working with them for about a year , Youderian and his family began ministering to a tribe related to the Shuar , the Achuar people . He worked with Nate Saint to provide important medical supplies ; but after a period of attempting to build relationships with them , he failed to see any positive effect and , growing depressed , considered returning to the United States . However , during this time Saint approached him about joining their team to meet the Huaorani , and he assented .

= = Initial contact = =

The first stage of Operation Auca began in September 1955 . Saint , McCully , Elliot , and fellow missionary Johnny Keenan decided to initiate contact with the Huaorani and began periodically searching for them by air . By the end of the month , they had identified several clearings in the jungle . Meanwhile , Elliot learned several phrases in the language of the Huaorani from Dayuma , a young Huaorani woman who had left her society and become friends with Rachel Saint , a missionary and the sister of Nate Saint . The missionaries hoped that by regularly giving gifts to the Huaorani and attempting to communicate with them in their language , they would be able to win them over as friends .

Because of the difficulty and risk of meeting the Huaorani on the ground , the missionaries chose to drop gifts to the Huaorani by fixed @-@ wing aircraft . Their drop technique , developed by Nate Saint , involved flying around the drop location in tight circles while lowering the gift from the plane on a rope . This kept the bundle in roughly the same position as it approached the ground . On October 6 , 1955 , Saint made the first drop , releasing a small kettle containing buttons and rock salt . The gift @-@ giving continued during the following weeks , with the missionaries dropping machetes , ribbons , clothing , pots , and various trinkets .

After several visits to the Auca village , which the missionaries called " Terminal City " , they observed that the Huaorani seemed excited to receive their gifts . Encouraged , they began using a loudspeaker to shout simple Huaorani phrases as they circled . After several more drops , in November the Huaorani began tying gifts for the missionaries to the line after removing the gifts the missionaries gave them . The men took this as a gesture of friendliness and developed plans for meeting the Huaorani on the ground . Saint soon identified a 200 @-@ yard (200 m) sandbar along the Curaray River about 4 @.@ 5 miles (7 km) from Terminal City that could serve as a runway and camp site , and dubbed it " Palm Beach " .

= = Palm Beach = =

At this point , Pete Fleming had still not decided to participate in the operation , and Roger Youderian was still working in the jungle farther south . On December 23 , the Flemings , Saints , Elliots and McCullys together made plans to land at Palm Beach and build a camp on January 3 , 1956 . They agreed to take weapons , but decided that they would only be used to fire into the air to scare the Huaorani if they attacked . They built a sort of tree house that could be assembled upon arrival , and collected gifts , first aid equipment , and language notes .

By January 2 , Youderian had arrived and Fleming had confirmed his involvement , so the five met in Arajuno to prepare to leave the following day . After minor mechanical trouble with the plane , Saint and McCully took off at 8 : 02 a.m. on January 3 and successfully landed on the sandy beach along the Curaray River . Saint then flew Elliot and Youderian to the camp , and then made several more flights , carrying equipment . After the last delivery , he flew over a Huaorani settlement and , using a loudspeaker , told the Huaorani to visit the missionaries ' camp . He then returned to Arajuno , and the next day , he and Fleming flew out to Palm Beach .

= = = First visit = = =

On January 6 , after the Americans had spent several days of waiting and shouting basic Huaorani phrases into the jungle , the first Huaorani visitors arrived . A young man and two women emerged on the opposite river bank around 11 : 15 a.m. , and soon joined the missionaries at their encampment . The younger of the two women had come against the wishes of her family , and the man , named Nankiwi , who was romantically interested in her , followed . The older woman (about thirty years old) acted as a self @-@ appointed chaperone . The men gave them several gifts , including a model plane , and the visitors soon relaxed and began conversing freely , apparently not realizing that the men 's language skills were weak . Nankiwi , whom the missionaries nicknamed " George " , showed interest in their aircraft , so Saint took off with him aboard . They first completed a circuit around the camp , but Nankiwi appeared eager for a second trip , so they flew toward Terminal City . Upon reaching a familiar clearing , Nankiwi recognized his neighbors , and leaning out of the plane , wildly waved and shouted to them . Later that afternoon , the younger woman became restless , and though the missionaries offered their visitors sleeping quarters , Nankiwi and the young woman left the beach with little explanation . The older woman apparently had more interest in conversing with the missionaries , and remained there most of the night .

After seeing Nankiwi in the plane , a small group of Huaorani decided to make the trip to Palm Beach , and left the following morning , January 7 . On the way , they encountered Nankiwi and the girl , returning unescorted . The girl 's brother , Nampa , was furious at this , and to defuse the situation and divert attention from himself , Nankiwi claimed that the foreigners had attacked them on the beach , and in their haste to flee , they had been separated from their chaperone . Gikita , a senior member of the group whose experience with outsiders had taught him that they could not be trusted , recommended that they kill the foreigners . The return of the older woman and her account of the friendliness of the missionaries was not enough to dissuade them , and they soon continued toward the beach .

= = = Attack = = =

On January 8 the missionaries waited , expecting a larger group of Huaorani to arrive sometime that afternoon , if only to get plane rides . Saint made several trips over Huaorani settlements , and on the following morning he noted a group of Huaorani men traveling toward Palm Beach . He excitedly relayed this information to his wife over the radio at 12 : 30 p.m. , promising to make contact again at 4 : 30 p.m.

The Huaorani arrived at Palm Beach around 3 : 00 p.m. , and in order to divide the foreigners before attacking them , they sent three women to the other side of the river . One , Dawa , remained hidden in the jungle , but the other two showed themselves . Two of the missionaries waded into the water to greet them , but were attacked from behind by Nampa . Apparently attempting to scare him , Elliot , the first missionary to be speared , drew his pistol and began firing . One of these shots

mildly injured Dawa , still hidden , and another grazed the missionary 's attacker after he was grabbed from behind by one of the women . Accounts differ on the effect of that bullet . Missionaries interpreted the testimonies of Dawa and Dayuma to mean that Nampa was killed months later while hunting , but others , including missionary anthropologist James Yost , came to believe that his death was a result of the bullet wound . Rachel Saint did not accept this , holding that eyewitnesses supported her position , but researcher Laura Rival , a critic of the expedition , suggests that it is now commonly believed among Huaorani that Nampa died of the wound . The other missionary in the river , Fleming , before being speared , desperately reiterated friendly overtures and asked the Huaorani why they were killing them . Meanwhile , the other Huaorani warriors , led by Gikita , attacked the three missionaries still on the beach , spearing Saint first , then McCully as he rushed to stop them . Youderian ran to the airplane to get to the radio , but he was speared as he picked up the microphone to report the attack . The Huaorani then threw the men 's bodies and their belongings in the river , and ripped the fabric from their aircraft . They then returned to their village and , anticipating retribution , burned it to the ground and fled into the jungle .

= = = Search = = =

At 4 : 30 p.m. , Marj Saint and Pete Fleming 's wife , Olive , were waiting for the call from Saint . Not receiving word at 4 : 30 p.m. immediately caused his wife Marj to worry , but Marj and Olive did not tell anyone about the lack of communication until that evening . (To avoid interference , the entire mission had been kept a secret from all those not directly involved at the time , thus making the timing of this announcement more difficult .) The next morning , January 9 , Johnny Keenan flew to the camp site , and at 9 : 30 a.m. he reported via radio to the wives that the plane was stripped of its fabric , and that the men were not there . The Commander in Chief of the Caribbean Command , Lieutenant General William K. Harrison , was contacted , and Quito @-@ based radio station HCJB released a news bulletin saying that five men were missing in Huaorani territory . Soon , aircraft from the United States Air Rescue Service in Panama were flying over the jungle , and a ground search party consisting of missionaries and military personnel was organized . The first two of the bodies were found on Wednesday , January 11 , and on Thursday , Ed McCully 's body was identified by a group of Quechuas . They took his watch as evidence of the finding but did not move his body from its location on the bank of the Curaray ; it later washed away . Two more bodies were found on January 12 . The searchers hoped that one of the unidentified bodies would be McCully , thinking that perhaps one of the men had escaped . However , on January 13 , all four of the bodies found were positively identified by watches and wedding rings , and McCully 's body was not among them , confirming that all five were dead . In the midst of a tropical storm , they were buried in a common grave at Palm Beach on January 14 by members of the ground search party .

= = Aftermath = =

Life magazine covered the deaths of the men with a photo essay , including photographs by Cornell Capa and some taken by the five men before their deaths . The ensuing worldwide publicity gave several missionary organizations significant more visibility , especially in the United States and Latin America . Most notable among these was the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) , the organization for which both Elisabeth Elliot and Rachel Saint worked . Because of the martyrdom of her brother , Saint considered herself spiritually bonded to the Huaorani , believing that what she saw as his sacrifice for the Huaorani was symbolic of Christ 's death for the salvation of humanity . In 1957 , Saint and her Huaorani companion Dayuma toured across the United States and appeared on the television show This Is Your Life . The two also appeared in a Billy Graham crusade in New York City , contributing to Saint 's increasing popularity among evangelical Christians and generating significant monetary donations for SIL .

Saint and Elliot returned to Ecuador to work among the Huaorani (1958 @-@ 1960) , establishing a camp called Tihueno near a former Huaorani settlement . Rachel Saint and Dayuma became bonded in Huaorani eyes through their shared mourning and Rachel 's adoption as a sister of

Dayuma , taking the name Nemo from the latter 's deceased youngest sister . The first Huaorani to settle there were primarily women and children from a Huaorani group called the Guiketairi , but in 1968 an enemy Huaorani band known as the Baihuari joined them . Elliot had returned to the United States in the early 1960s , so Saint and Dayuma worked to alleviate the resulting conflict . They succeeded in securing cohabitation of the two groups by overseeing numerous cross @-@ band weddings , leading to an end of inter @-@ clan warfare but obscuring the cultural identity of each group .

Saint and Dayuma , in conjunction with SIL , negotiated the creation of an official Huaorani reservation in 1969 , consolidating the Huaorani and consequently opening up the area to commerce and oil exploration . By 1973 , over 500 people lived in Tihueno , of which more than half had arrived in the previous six years . The settlement relied on aid from SIL , and as a Christian community , followed rules foreign to Huaorani culture like prohibitions on killing and polygamy . By the early 1970s , SIL began to question whether their impact on the Huaorani was positive , so they sent James Yost , a staff anthropologist , to assess the situation . He found extensive economic dependence and increasing cultural assimilation , and as a result , SIL ended its support of the settlement in 1976 , leading to its disintegration and the dispersion of the Huaorani into the surrounding area . SIL had hoped that the Huaorani would return to the isolation in which they had lived twenty years prior , but instead they sought out contact with the outside world , forming villages of which many have been recognized by the Ecuadorian government .

= = Legacy = =

= = = Christian views = = =

Among evangelical Christians , the five men are commonly considered martyrs and missionary heroes . Books have been written about them by numerous biographers , most notably Elisabeth Elliot . Anniversaries of their deaths have been accompanied by stories in major Christian publications , and their story , as well as the subsequent acceptance of Christianity among the Huaorani , has been turned into several motion pictures .

Even so , Christians have noted with concern the disintegration of traditional Huaorani culture and westernization of the tribe , beginning with Nate Saint 's own journal entry in 1955 and continuing through today . However , many continue to view as positive both Operation Auca and the subsequent missionary efforts of Rachel Saint , mission organizations such as Mission Aviation Fellowship , Wycliffe Bible Translators , HCJB World Radio , Avant Ministries (formerly Gospel Missionary Union) , and others . Specifically , they note the decline in violence among tribe members , numerous conversions to Christianity , and growth of the local church .

= = = Anthropologist views = = =

Anthropologists generally have less favorable views of the missionary work begun by Operation Auca , viewing the intervention as the cause for the recent and widely recognized decline of Huaorani culture . Leading Huaorani researcher Laura Rival says that the work of the SIL " pacified " the Huaorani during the 1960s , and argues that missionary intervention caused significant changes in fundamental components of Huaorani society . Prohibitions of polygamy , violence , chanting , and dancing were directly contrary to cultural norms , and the relocation of Huaorani and subsequent intermarrying of previously hostile groups eroded cultural identity . Others are somewhat less negative ? Brysk , after noting that the work of the missionaries opened the area to outside intervention and led to the deterioration of the culture , says that the SIL also informed the Huaorani of their legal rights and taught them how to protect their interests from developers . Boster goes even further , suggesting that the " pacification " of the Huaorani was a result of " active effort " by the Huaorani themselves , not the result of missionary imposition . He argues that Christianity served as a way for the Huaorani to escape the cycle of violence in their community , since it

provided a motivation to abstain from killing .

= = = Film depictions = = =

There have been several screen depictions of Operation Auca . The 2004 documentary *Beyond the Gates of Splendor* featured interviews with some of the Huaorani and surviving family members of the missionaries . The 2006 drama film *End of the Spear* grossed over \$ 12 million .