

REPORT ON ATTEMPT TO ESTABLISH  
FRIENDLY CONTACT WITH AUCA INDIANS

On Friday, January 6, 1956, the first friendly contact with the savage Auca Indians was made on the beach of the Cururay River by five evangelical missionaries. The five men are: Nathanael Saint of The Missionary Aviation Fellowship; Edward McCully, Peter Fleming, and James Elliot of Christian Missions in Many Lands; and Roger Youderian of The Gospel Missionary Union. The last word heard from these five men came at noon on Sunday, January 8, when they indicated that everything was going well and that they would give a further report by radio at 4:30 P.M. the same day. They did not keep the scheduled report. John Keenan of The Missionary Aviation Fellowship flew over the site on the Cururay River the next morning and found the Piper Family Cruiser the men had used to get to the Aucas. The plane was standing on the beach with all the fabric stripped off it. On this first and a number of subsequent flights there was no sign of the five men in question.

Before additional facts concerning the above are given, it is important that we give a complete report, both concerning the purpose which animated these missionary colleagues, and the very thorough preparations that they made for this supreme attempt to establish friendly contact with the Aucas Indians and present to them the Gospel message.

We believe that a few paragraphs of a letter written by Nate Saint on December 18 adequately express the purpose and feeling of the entire group of men, and give a very justifiable reason for risking their lives to reach these savage Aucas:

"As we have a high old time this Christmas, may we who know Christ hear the cry of the damned as they hurdle headlong into the Christless night without ever a chance. May we be moved with compassion as our Lord was. May we shed tears of repentance for those whom we have failed to bring out of darkness. Beyond the smiling scenes of Bethlehem may we see the crushing agony of Golgotha. May God give us a new vision of His will concerning the lost and our responsibility."

"Would that we could comprehend the lot of these stone-age people who live in mortal fear of ambush on the jungle trail--those to whom the bark of a gun means sudden mysterious death--those who think all the men in the world are killers like themselves. If God would grant us the vision, the word sacrifice would disappear from our lips and thoughts; we would hate the things that now seem so dear to us; our lives would suddenly be too short, we would despise time-robbing distractions and charge the enemy with all our energies in the name of Christ. May God help us to judge ourselves by the eternities that separate the Aucas from a comprehension of Christmas and Him, who though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, so that we through His poverty might be made rich."

For some years now a number of evangelical missionaries in Ecuador have been deeply concerned about reaching the Auca Indians. A party went in search of them by balsam raft down one of the jungle rivers, only to be ambushed by the Indians at a river bend when the current of the river carried the raft near to the bank. Fortunately all the people on the raft escaped without any serious injury. Then during the past year, it has been possible to be in contact with four Auca women who fled from their own tribe and who are now living in the territory of the Quechua-speaking Indians of the northern jungle. From one of the women especially, a limited vocabulary of Auca words and verbs has been obtained so as to make con-



tact with the Aucas feasible from this standpoint. The last visit to these Auca women was made in December, 1955, and from them additional words and phrases were obtained.

With this background we can continue this story of heroic missionary sacrifice. This particular incident begins with sighting the Auca Indians from the air on September 29, 1955. From that time forward the five fellows involved made very thorough, ingenious, and remarkable preparations to establish contact with the Aucas. The journal of flights, carefully kept by the pilot, Nate Saint, indicates that from October 6, 1955, until the end of the year, a total of 12 flights were made to the village of the Aucas--about ten minutes flying time from Arajuno. On all these 12 flights gifts were freely dropped from the plane or sent down to the Indians by the unique bucket method perfected by Nate Saint. The gifts consisted of Aluminum kettles, shirts, and trousers, machetes, combs, and gaudily colored ribbons. With the exception of the first flight, the gifts were immediately appropriated by the Indians. The regular flights, made about a week apart, seemed to make the Indians increasingly friendly. At first the plane flew at a high altitude above the Indians, but gradually came down lower in succeeding flights. This continued until the missionaries were flying at such a low altitude that all the characteristic features of the Aucas and their environment could be clearly established.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of these preliminary contacts is that after a number of trips the Indians became understanding enough to return some gifts of their own when the bucket method of dropping things to them was used. The first such incident occurred on November 12 when the Indians placed a feather crown and some combs in the bucket as their return gift. On six other occasions the Indians returned gifts including a parrot, a large black bird, and some of their own food-stuffs such as yuca, fish, cooked meat, etc.

There were at least three other things which the Indians did which gave evidence of a certain degree of friendship. 1. They cut down large trees around their village, making a clearing so that it would be easier to drop gifts to them. 2. They made a crude model airplane and put it on the roof of one of their houses. 3. They built a platform about 20 feet high from which they could establish better contact with the low-flying airplane.

Based upon the increasing friendliness of the Aucas, the five men now made specific preparations to fly to a beach on the Curaray River, just a few miles from the Auca village, and make an all-out attempt to reach these Indians whom they had contacted in twelve flights over their village. Plans were made in an impressively thorough way. These plans included provisions for many days, a tree house (prefabricated), carrying of weapons in case of dire emergency, good radio equipment and contacts. The base of operations and point of departure was Arajuno which had been occupied as a mission station by the McCullys.

The entrance was made on Tuesday, January 3, 1956. In the diary of Peter Fleming, dated January 4th, we read the following: "The second day of the Auca project. Yesterday I helped as Ed, Jim and Rog were slipped down to the playa (beach), where they put a tree house on the edge of it with real toil, sweat, and torture from the sweet bees and tiny flies. Nate made six flights or so to get all the equipment out, and they really had a day of it. The weather was perfect, and God's hand was also seen in the split-second timing kept up for the initial flights." The rest of the day's entry speaks of difficulties encountered, especially from the insects, and about the attempts to advise the Aucas of their presence. The day's entry ends in the following way, "Tomorrow will be another day of it, perhaps



giving us the contact we long for. The Aucas are definitely looking for us somewhere. They may have already spotted us, and are now watching us, or they may mistakenly be headed up here (Arajuno). May God control in all."

Additional information of the first days is given by Nate Saint in his written report which has just reached us here in Shell Mera. He gives a pilot's version of the difficulties in landing and taking off from that beach during those first few days. Two snatches from this report are of exceptional interest.

"Thank God for the unusually evident blessing we have seen yesterday and today. Thank God for a good team, and forbid that any man should fail to praise Him."

"We find that we have a friendlier feeling for these fellows all the time. We must not let that lead us to carelessness. It is no small thing to try to bridge between the 20th century and the stone age. God help us to take care."

Now for a continuation of the story we refer again to the diary of Pete Fleming. The entry is dated January 6. It begins as follows, "This is a great day for the advance of the Gospel of Christ in Ecuador. On a 200 yard long playa, on the middle of the Curaray River about 11:15 this morning, an Auca voice boomed out a barrage of unintelligible, excited sounds to give us the long-awaited-for and much-prayed-for first contact with these savages. ---Midmorning found Ed on one end of the playa, Jim on the other, and Rog, Nate and I in the center near the shack -- all of us shouting phrases periodically. Suddenly from directly across the river, a strong masculine voice began jabbering at Ed, and immediately three Aucas stepped out into the open on the opposite bank, two women and a man. My heart jumped and thumped wildly as we walked slowly to join Ed and to shout phrases with him.

(Note: Jim Elliot went into the river to meet the Aucas. Jim caught them by the hand and led them back to the fellows.) Here we continue with the diary. "The man was a young fellow of 20 or so, the girl younger, and the woman perhaps 30 or so. They were completely naked except for a G string around the waist. -- They showed neither fear or comprehension of what cameras are, and some excellent shots were taken. The man was interested but not forward, completely unafraid and unembarrassed, and at home. He was natural and self-possessed. Soon the fellow began to show interest in the plane, and we guessed from his talk that he was willing to go to the Auca village to call his comrades.

"We put a shirt on him, and he climbed into the plane with no sign of any emotion except eagerness to do his part. -- Nate taxied down the strip, and took off while the fellow shouted all the way. After circling and shouting briefly, Nate landed again, thinking to give the fellow a rest before making the flight to Terminal City (Auca Village). Nothing doing -- he was ready to go then. I guess he shouted all the way over and back, and thoroughly enjoyed the trip.

"...They stayed right there on the playa when we left, evidently preparing to spend the night there. We can earnestly pray that the others will come over and invite us to go to their place. This fellow has seemed reluctant whenever we mentioned the subject, or it may be that he lacks the authority to invite us on his own."

We have given all the pertinent information that can be obtained from the diaries that are available. The only additional further word is that mentioned at the beginning of this report--this word being sent by radio from the beach on Sunday at noon.



At the time of writing this report, what has actually happened is still a total mystery. We are deeply grateful to the Air Rescue Squadron (MATS-US Air Force) under the direction of Capt. DeWitt for their great help in surveying the sight. Also to the officials of the American Air Mission in Quito--Lieut. Col. Hellrigel, Major Pollard, and Major Nucremberg. To the military attache, Col. Woodford. And to the American Ambassador, Mr. Mills. We appreciate the cooperation of the Ecuadorean Air Force in bringing aviation gasoline and in providing troops for a ground search party. We are thankful for the help of TAO Airline in making necessary trips into Arajuno with supplies and personnel. Missionaries and colleagues of different groups are banding together to help in the greatest way possible. Larry Montgomery of the Summer Institute of Linguistics is directing operations in Shell Mera in conjunction with the Air Rescue Squadron. This morning a land party started out from Arajuno in the direction of the place where the five fellows had their rendezvous with the Aucas. The party is composed of the following missionaries: Frank Drown, Morris Fuller, Dee Short, Jack Shelanko, Art Johnston and Don Johnston, and Bud Borman. In addition there are 13 Ecuadorean soldiers and some Indians. This party hopes to reach the site in two days. Two C-47's of the Air Rescue Squadron have just arrived. They contain a small helicopter and service crew.

It is very evident that our missionary colleagues have been attacked by the Aucas, and that there are some casualties. At least two bodies have been sighted from the air, one of them with an Auca lance in the body. These are located fairly near the stripped plane. There is still a hope that there may be some survivors, but up to this time there has not been any sign of life.

One word should be said concerning the five missionary wives who are awaiting news concerning the condition of their husbands. Wonderful peace and calm reigns among them. There is, of course, evidence of deep sorrow and anguish. However, there is also in evidence the sustaining and comforting power of our Great God.

The Apostle Paul desired that Christ should be magnified in His body whether by life or by death. This we know was the heart cry of the five fellows who went out to make contact with the Aucas. There are three important principles that we would like to underline as we conclude this report:

1. We greatly admire our five missionary colleagues for this project they have undertaken. We heartily approve of their all-out effort to reach the Aucas, and the methods which were employed to do so. These men took all possible precautions that were consistent with this daring step of faith.
2. Whatever the final outcome of the incident, we know that the Lord will use it for His glory and the blessing of many. God is never mistaken. We trust Him just as fully now as we have done down through the years.
3. We trust that we will all continue to have a burning desire to reach the Auca Indians with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We feel that earnest prayer and careful preparation must go on with even greater intensity until the Aucas know and accept the message of salvation in Christ Jesus.

News Bulletin #2 - Thursday, January 12, 1956

It is very interesting that the five missionary men who entered Auca territory to establish contact with the savages covered all of the preparatory operations and their actual entrance into Auca territory with the greatest of secrecy. In this,



the missionaries demonstrated very wise judgment. The possible success of the whole endeavor depended much on absolute secrecy. If the public had known about all the preparations, a long series of problems would have developed. Other planes would no doubt have begun to fly over if the word had gotten out, curiosity seekers would have converged in Shell Mera, and possibly some bold adventurers would have tried to beat them to the contact. All this activity and movement would have made the Aucas completely apprehensive as to just what was going on. We need to underline again the motives that drove the five missionaries into Auca territory. Their purpose was to bring to the Aucas the transforming power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which Gospel is the only hope for pacifying and changing this savage tribe.

The cooperation of the military of both the Ecuadorian and American governments is appreciated beyond measure. It is appropriate to underline especially the wholehearted cooperation of the commander of the Ecuadorian army detachment at the Shell Mera (Pastaza) Base of the Ecuadorian Air Force. He is Lieutenant Col. Nelson Paz y Miño. This morning he personally accompanied the search planes so as to be able to evaluate the situation. We were also very pleased to see Col. Ixurieta upon his arrival from Quito yesterday.

It is very encouraging to see the way the men of the helicopter group of the Air Rescue Squadron went to work to get the machine into flying condition as soon as possible. The residents of Shell Mera, having never seen a helicopter until last night are watching every move with undivided attention.

The cooperation of TAO Airline and its pilots:- Capt. Ruales and Mr. Drexel have been on the alert for any significant signs while they are flying on their regular runs to jungle airstrips. They have given some interesting clues which might well be of great value in solving all the unknown details of this incident. The comprehensive knowledge of the jungle that the two TAO pilots have is very helpful.

#### NURNBERG

Contact between the ground party on its way to the site has been definitely established. This morning, Major Nurnberg, flying with John Keenan of the Missionary Aviation Fellowship, talked by URC-4 radio with Frank Drown, who is heading the land party. Their progress is satisfactory and the members of the party are in good shape. It is hoped that very quickly the party will make contact with two canoes of Indians who were near the sight yesterday. It is possible that these Indians will have some significant information. At present, the weather over Arajuno is impeding somewhat the search efforts.

#### NEWS BULLETIN #3, Thursday January 12, 1956

A helicopter searching party that was able to go to the site today has definitely established that there are four unidentified bodies on the beach and in the water near the camp site of the five evangelical missionaries who made an all-out attempt to reach the savage Auca Indians with the Gospel. The helicopter was piloted by Captain McGeo accompanied by Major Nurnberg. Major Nurnberg was able to spend a short time on the beach while the helicopter was standing on the beach revved up to full RPM awaiting any emergency.

Now we will give further details concerning the search operations and any other salient facts. The weather over Shell Mera and Arajuno during the morning permitted only limited search flying. With weather finally permitting at about 1:45 PM, three planes took off for Arajuno: a C-47 of the US Navy, an H-13 Helicopter of



the US Army and the Piper Pacer of the Missionary Aviation Fellowship. Landing was made at Arajuno at about 2:30 P.M. Just as soon as refueling operations could be cared for in connection with the helicopter, at 2:50 PM, the helicopter with Capt. McGee and Major Nurnberg headed in the direction of the site. At the same time, the Albatross of the Air Rescue Squadron left Shell Mera to have a rendezvous with the helicopter. Capt. DeWitt was directing operations. The Piper Pacer and the C-47 also headed for the site to provide cover for the helicopter.

At 3:10 PM, the helicopter landed at the spot to which the ground party had advanced, about ten miles up river from the site. The ground party was making good progress and its members were in good condition. They expected to reach the place of the site some time the next morning. The ground party had made contact with the two canoes of Indians that had been sighted from the air the day before. These Indians indicated that they had been as far as the site. They had seen one body and didn't stop to search for more. They had also entered into the tree-house and had only found a radio which they turned over to Frank Drown when they met the ground party.

After meeting the ground party, the helicopter crew went immediately to the place of the site with the other planes providing cover. As already indicated, Major Nurnberg stepped on to the beach and was able to search and reconnoiter for a limited time. He was able to locate four bodies. They were on the beach or either wholly or partly in the water. Although the best possible notes were made concerning the important characteristics of each body, no positive identification could be made. The Major found a few sheets of notebook paper on the beach; these sheets contained some writing of Auca words and phrases. One shoe was also found quite some distance down the beach but not near any one of the bodies. The bodies were located in the following positions: The first body, going downstream caught under log debris and with only the feet out of the water. The second body, about 200 yards downstream from the aircraft. The third body, about 300 yards downstream from the aircraft. The fourth body, about half a mile below the camp.

After making this survey, the helicopter with the two men went down river at tree-top level about seven miles but did not find anything of further significance.

It should be noted that it was determined that most of the Piper Family Cruiser down on the beach at the site is still intact. As already known, the fabric has been stripped off. There has been some mutilation of the tail and a wing tip. The fabric has been torn off the seat. The rest of the plane is in good condition: propeller, engine, instruments, tires, etc.

This report concluded with an emphasis upon certain facts and principles that have been underlined repeatedly in these news releases.

1. We are deeply grateful for the marvelous cooperation of the military forces of both the US and Ecuadorian Governments. We would like to emphasize especially the wholehearted cooperation of the following: The Air Rescue Squadron under the direction of Capt. DeWitt; the Air Mission to Ecuador under the direction of Major Nurnberg; the helicopter pilots and crew under the direction of Capt. McGee; the services of the US Navy Mission to Ecuador. Yesterday Col. Izurieta of the Ecuadorian Air Force accompanied us to Arajuno and remained until the searching party returned with the sad news. Col. Paz y Miño continues to give much-appreciated help and cooperation.



2. We are praising God for the very evident calm and peace that He has given to the wives of the five missionary men. When the full details of what had been found were given to them this evening, in the midst of sorrow, there was a sincere note of praise and thanksgiving to God and conformity to His perfect will. We are seeing an eloquent testimony of the power and beauty of the Christian faith, the faith for which these men gave their lives. I have been inspired and thrilled to see how these missionary wives are fully in accord with the mission on which their husbands went in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. These men and these women belong to that noble army of those who love Christ more than anything or anybody and who have showed it and are showing it in practical, genuine consecration to Him.
3. When will these Aucas be reached? Who will be the next to carry actively upon his heart the burden for those precious souls? God is faithful and will not allow to be in vain the sacrifice for Him that these men have given. These grains of wheat which have fallen into the ground both spiritually and in a literal physical sense, will bear fruit. God grant that even the darkened hearts and consciences of these Aucas will have been softened by what they saw in these men and by the conviction power of the Holy Spirit.

NEWS BULLETIN #4, Friday, January 13, 1956

Today's activities have clearly established that all five evangelical missionaries have been killed by the Auca Indians. The land party and the helicopter crew have found the five bodies. Here are the details of today's operations. At 11:15 AM, the C-47 of the US Navy and the H-13 helicopter of the US Army left Shell Mera for Arajuno. They arrived at Arajuno and after refueling took off for the incident site at 12:00 PM. At the same time, the Albatross of the Air Rescue Squadron took off from Shell Mera to rendezvous with the helicopter over the incident site.

The helicopter piloted by Lieut. Claunch had as passenger Major Nurnberg on the first trip to the site. Then the helicopter returned to Arajuno to bring the LIFE correspondent Cornell Capa to the place of the tragedy. On this second trip, the pilot encountered very bad weather with heavy rain and had great difficulty in landing at the incident site. At 12:35 PM while I was flying with the crew of the Albatross, we heard the news that the fifth body had been found.

Lieut. Claunch then returned to Arajuno in the helicopter after remaining at the incident site for about 15 minutes.

The ground party directed by Frank Drown, after recovering the bodies, immediately carried out the task of burying them at the incident site. This was done by the request and permission of the five wives of these men in view of the difficulties in seeking to bring out the bodies and the appropriateness of having them rest where they had fallen in the line of Gospel duty. Some personal effects were recovered, among them two cameras, three wedding rings, a watch, a knife, a match holder, etc. It is significant that the watch of Nate Saint which was recovered had a broken crystal on it and the time indicated 3:12. This could mean that the attack occurred about that time and the damage to the watch caused it to stop at that time. This, of course, coincides with the noon radio contact on Sunday, January 8, and the failure of the radio contact later on at 4:30 PM.

After burying the five bodies, the ground party started immediately up river to get out of the danger area as quickly as possible. Major Nurnberg and LIFE correspondent Capa have remained with the ground party and expect to be flown out by the



helicopter tomorrow. During today's activities we were pleased to have the help of Colonel Andrade Ochea, chief of the Ecuadorean Air Force, who flew cover with the other planes around the incident site. Col. Paz y Miño also accompanied on this flight. Thank you to these Ecuadorean military men.

The certain news that we have received today has helped to relieve the severe tension of uncertainty that we have felt since it became known that the men apparently met with foul play on the part of the Aucas. But even more we continue to thank God for the peace that He has given to the wives of our missionary colleagues, whose names can now be added to the list of outstanding heroes of faith mentioned Hebrews 11. As I write this article, one of the ladies is seated at the piano playing the Gospel song whose chorus says:

Fear thou not, for I'll be with thee, I will still thy Pilot be  
Never mind the tossing billows, Take my hand and trust in me.

This is followed by the tune of Finlandia to which have been set these beautiful words of Christian challenge and consecration and which were sung by the fellows before they set out for Auca territory.

We rest on Thee our shield and our defender  
We go not forth alone against the foe  
Strong in Thy strength, safe in thy keeping tender  
We rest on Thee and in Thy Name we go.

We rest on Thee our shield and our defender  
Thine is the battle, Thine shall be the praise.  
When passing through the gates of pearly splendor  
Victors, we rest with Thee through endless days.

In the light of all that has happened, this song is beautifully prophetic. These men have passed through the gates of pearly splendor and rest with our Lord through endless days.

#### BULLETIN #5, Saturday, January 14, 1956

It is a beautiful day here in Shell Mera: blue skies with large, fleecy white clouds. At 8 AM, the helicopter of the US Army took off from Shell Mera for Arajuno and, after refueling, to make contact with the returning land party, which now includes Major Nurnberg and Correspondent Capa. The helicopter is being piloted by Lieutenant Claunch accompanied by the US Army photographer, Sgt. Paulson. It is expected that Major Nurnberg and Correspondent Capa will quickly be brought out to Shell Mera by helicopter.

By their own request, the five wives are being flown over the incident site by the C-47 of the US Navy. The C-47 took off from Shell Mera at 8 AM at the same time as the helicopter. At 8:50, the helicopter headed out toward the ground party. At 10:30, the Albatross took off from Shell Mera to meet the helicopter and provide cover. The planes returned at about 1:30.

At 3:07 PM, at the headquarters of The Missionary Aviation Fellowship, missionaries and correspondents gathered to hear the report of Major Nurnberg. The first item cleared up was that only four bodies had been found and buried. However, an Indian had definitely seen the missing body some days before and had taken from it



sufficient personal effects to make it completely sure that all five men had been killed.

It seems clear that all of the men whose bodies were found were killed with lances. There was also evidence of further damage by machete blows. Burial was made at the foot of the tree house and all the four bodies were buried together. Identification of these bodies was positive. One of the spears driven into the men had some pages of a Spanish Testament wrapped around it with the thread that the Indians use to wind their lances. The tree house was entirely stripped of all its belongings by the time the land party arrived. There was no indication of damage done to the Aucas. A bullet hole was found in the windshield of the mission airplane and appeared to have been shot from the beach toward the jungle.

After taking care of the burial of the bodies, the land party with Major Nurnberg Correspondent Capa left the site at About 2:45 PM. They proceeded up river till about 5 PM where they made camp on a sand bar. After some time, the Indians and the Ecuadorian soldiers indicated that from sounds they heard, it was obvious that there were Auca Indians in the area across the river. About 5 AM, Major Nurnberg sprayed the area with rifle fire and the sounds ceased. The land party broke camp at 7 AM, and made rendezvous with the helicopter at about 12 noon. The land party is in good shape although they have had a very rough trip. The land party is carrying a few parts taken off the airplane. The rest of the plane had to be left on the beach.

Once again we express gratitude to all these mentioned above who have cooperated so greatly in this search project. Capt. DeWitt, chief of the Air Rescue Squadron, publicly expressed appreciation for the willing cooperation of all concerned. Little has been said of the brilliant work of the land party. They are real heroes.

And so ends our story up to this point. More will no doubt follow. This is the first chapter of a glorious drama which we still believe will result in contact with and conversion of the Auca Indians. To God be the glory!