

Missionary Martin Burnham

The American missionary died, but his wife survived after being held in the Philippine jungle for a year

An American missionary couple's yearlong kidnapping ordeal ended in tragedy June 7 with one of them killed and the other wounded in a failed rescue attempt.

Martin Burnham, 42, was fatally shot in circumstances that remain unclear when Filipino troops moved in to try to free him and his wife, Gracia, from a Muslim extremist group. She was shot in the leg, while a third hostage also died in the clash near Siraway in the Philippines' southern Zamboango province.

The Burnhams and Ediborah Yap, a Filipino nurse, were the last of a string of hostages taken by the Abu Sayyaf, an Islamic group with links to Osama bin Laden, in raids that began on May 27 last year.

New Tribes Mission (NTM), with whom the Burnhams had served in the Philippines for 16 years, said their "hearts are heavy" over the deaths and that they "ache" for the Burnhams' three children who were reunited with their mother when she returned to her Kansas home June 10.

Martin Burnham was "executed by the Abu Sayyaf rebels" when they realized that a rescue effort was under way, Philippine Army Scout Ranger Col. Renato Padua said, reported The Philippine Star. Gracia Burnham, 43, was shot in the right thigh but taken to a military hospital where she underwent surgery before returning to the United States. She is now recovering at her home in Rose Hill, Kan.

President Bush phoned Burnham June 11 to express his condolences. The president said afterward that she was “a pillar of strength.”

Doug Burnham, Martin’s brother, said that “it hasn’t turned out the way we hoped,” CNN reported. “But we are grateful Gracia is alive. Our faith in the Lord is still the same.”

Upon her return, Gracia Burnham praised her husband as a “source of strength for all the hostages. He was a good man and he died well,” she said.

The Burnhams were pitched into the hostage crisis when the Abu Sayyaf raided a beach resort where the couple were spending a night to celebrate their anniversary. Thousands of Christians around the world prayed for the Burnhams’ safe release, with NTM issuing regular updates on efforts to win the pair’s freedom.

Although NTM has a policy of not paying ransoms, Martin Burnham’s parents arranged a payment in March, and later accused the rebels of reneging on the deal. In late May the U.S. government offered a \$5 million reward for information leading to the capture of the Abu Sayyaf leaders.

It is not the first time Sanford, NTM has been in the media spotlight over the death of its workers. The mission spent eight years trying to find out what happened to three staff kidnapped by armed guerrillas in Panama in 1993. Leaders eventually learned last year that the trio had been killed in 1996, ending years of painful uncertainty for the men’s wives and children.

At its Web site, NTM said that it “constantly evaluates the safety of our missionaries in each country where we serve.” Trained contingency coordinators monitor the placement and relocation of personnel.

“However, the Great Commission is not voided by risk. Rather, we are called to accept risk for the sake of the gospel.”

Burnham, who during his captivity had premonitions of his death, wrote a goodbye letter to his three children just days before his death. He gave the letter to his wife. It was lost in the firefight, but soldiers later found it.

The premonitions also inspired Burnham to ask his wife for a funeral sermon and a special song. Those requests were honored at a June 14 public memorial in Wichita.

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