

On Sacred Ground

Almost 50 years ago, American missionaries were slain by the Waodani tribe in Ecuador. Matt McCully, son of one of the missionaries, recently met and forgave his father's killer.

He stood by the man who killed his father. Stood on the same muddy-river beach in the remote Ecuadoran jungle where his father and four other missionaries were brutally killed. And Matt McCully, overwhelmed with emotion, stood listening to Mincaye tell how he and other members of his Waodani tribe murdered five missionaries that day in 1956.

"My whole life I felt this need to know exactly what happened that day," McCully says.

Finally the exact details of the massacre, which has for decades captured the world's attention and has forever changed these two men's lives, were shared. McCully, whose mother, Marilou, was eight months pregnant with him the day of the killings, never knew his father. Mincaye, because of the love and forgiveness of the missionaries' widows, became a Christian and came to know his heavenly Father.

After Marilou McCully died of Almost 50 years ago American missionaries were slain by the Waodani tribe in Ecuador. Matt McCully, son of one of the missionaries, recently met and forgave his father's killer cancer in April of last year, her ashes were scattered at the riverbank where her husband was killed 48 years before, completing a most unlikely journey. "I call it a wonderful, terrible place," McCully says about the location of his father's death.

Terrible because of the tragic deaths. Wonderful because of

the lives that were changed.

Miracle by a Muddy River

McCully, along with his two daughters and his two brothers and their families, returned to Ecuador in July 2000 for the first time since he was a small child, to meet the Waodani Indians who killed missionaries Ed McCully, Nate Saint, Jim Elliot, Roger Youderian and Peter Fleming.

During a 10-day visit to this remote, grass-hut village, McCully says he was filled with happiness and sorrow. One of the happiest moments came when his oldest daughter, Abby, was baptized by Mincaye, the man who killed her grandfather.

“They really connected,” McCully says. “It wasn’t something we went down there intending to do. I asked her what she thought of Mincaye baptizing her. She loved it.”

For McCully, the journey of horror and honor was complete when two strangers linked by a murder stood side by side, arms draped over each other’s shoulders, posing for a photo. Remarkably, he and Mincaye were smiling, each quickly becoming less of a stranger.

But Mincaye, who still lives in a village without electricity and has traveled the United States to tell his story, never said, “I’m sorry for what I did.”

“He never said that to me,” McCully says. “But I don’t think he thinks of himself as being the same person. It was like a different life.”

For two hours, McCully and 22 of his relatives who made the trip with him stood on the beach where the massacre occurred. Stephen Saint, son of Nate Saint, interpreted the recounting of that day by Mincaye and Kimo, another ex-warrior. Saint—who as a young boy was baptized, as McCully's daughter was, by Mincaye—lives among the Waodani today and arranged McCully's trip.

"It was like we were standing on sacred ground," McCully says.

The names he had heard since he was a child and the stories of the Indian warriors coming out of the jungle and killing the five missionaries all unfolded before him.

"The part of the trip that meant so much to me," McCully says, "was hearing Steve Saint—as he interprets from them—tell exactly where everyone stood and what happened." Although McCully had read about that day and heard about it from his mother, he says he felt as if he had been transported back in time to that moment.

What distinguishes this story from other martyr accounts of the last century is what happened after the killings. Several widows, sisters and children of the missionaries went back to live in Ecuador. They translated the Bible into Waodani so they could teach the people, and five decades later the relationship continues.

"One of the mistakes ... made over the years is that people refer to this as the story of five missionary men," McCully says. "It's not just about these men. It's also about their wives and this tribe and the changing power of God."

A documentary titled Beyond the Gates of Splendor—about the missionaries and the Waodani Indians—releases on home DVD in October (and is available now for church screenings). In January 2006, a full-length film about the martyrs, The End of the Spear, will be released in theaters across the country.

Last summer, the Waodani men who took part in the massacre watched the documentary. They were stunned when they heard one of the film's songs, saying it was the same music they had heard on the day of the killings.

"When they tell the story about the ambush, one of the things they say is, after they killed the men, they were very afraid," McCully says, "because they saw and heard hundreds of foreigners on the treetops. They said there were lights and music. They were sure they were coming."

While trumpet music played in the documentary, Kimo and Dowa became very excited. "They said, 'That's it!'" McCully says. "'That's the music we heard that day.'"

McCully's father was fully aware of the dangers he and the four other missionaries faced when they decided to reach the Waodani tribe. Ed McCully was in his first year of law school when he felt the call to become a missionary. It's a calling his son once pondered as well.

"There were times in my life I felt this guilt for not being a missionary," says McCully, who has been an air traffic controller for Sea-Tac Airport in Seattle for 18 years. "But I never felt that was what I should do. But where you are, you can be a missionary."

Anatomy of a Revival

Aware of the dangers they faced, the missionaries' initial contact was made with fly-bys in Nate Saint's bush plane, dropping gifts and trinkets for three months during the fall of 1955. In early January 1956, they landed and more gifts were exchanged.

"My mom said she was afraid," McCully says, who attends Grace Community Baptist Church near Tacoma. "But she said my dad was always so optimistic.

"She said to him, 'Ed, what happens if you die?' He said, 'We're not going to die.' Part of the confidence was that they felt sure they were doing what God wanted."

Neighboring tribes feared the Waodanis. They were a warring people. Anthropologists who have studied them say six out of 10 Waodani adults of that period died in intertribal conflicts. As a precaution, the missionaries took guns with them, but Matt McCully says they never intended to use them.

"They said [they were] ready for heaven; these people weren't," he says.

When Mincaye and Kimo retold the story of the attack to McCully, they said the missionaries fired warning shots. One of the Waodanis was grazed in the arm by a bullet when a gun discharged during a skirmish. Another spent bullet was found in the side of the airplane.

On January 3, 1956, the missionaries made camp along the

Curaray River, a few miles from the Waodani village. Within a few days, two women and a man named Kemi came into the missionaries' camp and spent the day with them. No hostility was shown.

But as Mincaye recounted the story for McCully, he said Kemi told his tribesmen the missionaries had threatened him. Kemi had said this—a lie—to protect himself because he had returned with only one of the women. He had left the other woman, who was older, to walk back alone through the jungle.

"The older woman was like a chaperon," McCully says. "[Kemi] had wanted to marry the other woman, but her parents didn't want him to. He already had two wives."

The older woman's family was angry when Kemi and the younger woman returned by themselves. "To cover, he lied," McCully says. "The older woman came back and said he was lying. But they didn't listen to her. They were stirred up."

Six warriors and a few women went to the missionaries' camp the next morning armed with spears, axes and machetes, and attacked. Mincaye, who was about 20 that day, gave the killing blow to Ed McCully.

Not long afterward, Kemi was murdered by members of his tribe. As was the tribal custom, Kemi's family was to be killed, too, including a baby boy. But a woman picked up the child and ran into the jungle, saving his life.

During his visit, McCully met that boy, Taminta, who today is the leader of the village's church. He and Mincaye were the ones who baptized McCully's daughter.

"I think it really is an extraordinary example of God's power to transform people's lives," McCully says. "And it's a story of the great faith of those families who loved God and never questioned His providence."

McCully has seen a photo of his mother that was taken a few days after the massacre, just before she boarded a plane with her children to fly back to the United States. She was 27, a widow and her third baby was on the way, but her concerns were more about the Indians she was leaving behind.

"In that picture, she looks so tired," McCully says. "I've asked her what was on her mind. She told me she just kept wondering who was going to help those poor people now."

Marilou McCully returned to her family's home in Michigan for Matt's birth. Within a year, she and her three sons had returned to Ecuador, eventually going to the Waodani and sharing the salvation message of Jesus. Rachel Saint, Nate Saint's sister, lived with the Waodani until her death in 1994.

"My mom said it was unbelievable how much peace she felt," McCully says. "There was only one explanation for that. It was the Spirit of God comforting her. It was this supernatural intervention that allowed her to have this peace and this love for these people."

For six years, Marilou ran a home for missionaries' children in a village with the Quechua Indians, who feared the neighboring Waodanis. There is now a school named after Ed and Marilou in that village. While at the school, McCully sang

with his family “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” which was his mother’s favorite song.

“It was fascinating to talk with Quechuas and hear them talk about my parents and about how they had changed their lives,” McCully says.

In 1994, while helping his mother move from her Seattle-area home, McCully found a 6-foot wooden spear used in killing the missionaries. The long, primitive spear now hangs on his living room wall.

“It represents such an important part of my life,” McCully says. “It doesn’t represent something I wish never would have happened.

“I’m sure there was a big part of my mom who wished her husband hadn’t been killed. But there was also a bigger part that recognized that this was something God wanted to do.”

McCully doesn’t question God about the killing that took his father’s life. Nor does he overestimate the spiritual needs of the Waodanis or underestimate his own.

“It’s easy for us to say, ‘Well, those people really needed God,’” McCully says. “But they didn’t need Him any more than we do. I never killed anyone, but my need for salvation and transformation of heart was just as great.”

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Beyond the Gates of Splendor

Elisabeth Elliot's powerful story is coming to the screen.

Elisabeth Elliot's classic 1957 book *Through Gates of Splendor* (Tyndale House) recounted how her husband, Jim, and four other missionary men died for Christ in the jungles of Ecuador in 1956. It has inspired Christians worldwide to live wholeheartedly for Jesus on their own mission fields, whether those are deep jungles or modern cities.

Her chronicle of faith, martyrdom and redemption has now made the leap from page to screen with a new 96-minute docudrama, titled *Beyond the Gates of Splendor*, and a feature film, *End of the Spear*, to be released in theaters in January 2006.

The documentary (available at [http://www.beyondthegatesofsplendor.com](#)), opens with the sound of tribal drums and chanting, as a narrator states: "How my family became part of a stone-age Amazon tribe is a story that began before I was born and is still being written today." The voice belongs to Stephen Saint, son of Nate Saint—one of Jim Elliott's missionary companions and fellow martyrs.

The rhythm and music of the jungle then switches to the rock 'n' roll of the 1950s as the story opens with images of mid-20th century American culture. A charming collage of photos, film clips and interviews reveals the personalities and ambitions of the young Wheaton College students who would soon be bound for the hostile forests of Ecuador. They are all-American, fun-loving kids who happen also to be sold-out Christians.

Each of the five missionaries' widows fondly recounts meeting

her husband. Ironically, Jim Elliott started out determined to remain single. He preached to his friends that this was the superior state for the truly committed missionary.

God saw fit to change Jim's mind when he falls in love with Elisabeth—who after her husband's death dares to take their young daughter with her to live among the Waodani Indians, the very people who killed Jim.

Again, the music transitions—this time to a sad and suspenseful melody as the day of tragedy unfolds. The widows as well as friends of the families recount their observations and reactions to the death of the five men. They reveal how they overcame loss and persevered in spreading the gospel among the Ecuadoran Indians.

Nate's sister, Rachel Saint, also went to live with the tribe and helped translate the Bible into their language. She stayed with the Waodani until her death in 1994. Afterward, the tribe asked her nephew Steve and his family to live with them.

Steve Saint gives a fascinating update of the current condition of the Waodanis and the transformation the gospel has brought them. Today the fierce tribal people who speared the “foreigners” are a gentle, loving and jovial people.

As they are told stories about the violence in the United States they express a desire to share God's salvation with Americans in hope that they too might learn to walk upon “the Creator's trail.”

The moving documentary brings to life the story of five brave Christians who died for Christ. It could stir a new generation

to answer God's call.

Deborah L. Delk