

Martyrs' Lost Plane Recovered in Ecuador

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Quito, Ecuador—The skeletal remains of an aircraft, uncovered on a remote beach along a river in Ecuador, are believed to be the lost plane piloted by American missionaries shortly before their murder in 1956.

Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAP) staff recently identified the remains of the Piper aircraft in an isolated Ecuadorian jungle as the plane flown by Nate Saint just before he was killed by Auca Indians in 1956.

Saint and four other missionaries were making first contact with a group of indigenous people when they were attacked with spears and killed. The moving story of their martyrdom inspired a generation of Christians around the world to enter foreign mission service.

MAF missionary Bill Clapp positively identified the remains pulled from a sandy beach along the Curaray River as being the front lower fuselage of the airplane flown by Saint. The airplane had lain buried beneath the shifting sands of Palm Beach, a small outcropping on the river, since the incident.

Clapp said that parts of the plane, including the motor, had been removed. Some portions of the craft were carried out by the recovery party, which included American military personnel stationed in Panama. Recent heavy rains and a shifting of the course of the river uncovered the lower fuselage, which was discovered by an Indian family.

Following the killing of the missionaries, four of the bodies were buried on the riverbank at the site. In later years, Elisabeth Elliot, widow of Plymouth Brethren missionary Jim Elliot, and Rachel Saint, sister of Nate Saint, lived among the Auca Indians (known today as the Huaorani), providing them with basic education, health care, and the gospel. Chronicles of the martyred pilots and the ministry to the Aucas have been told in several books, including *Through Gates of Splendor* and *The Savage, M Kinsman*, by Elisabeth Elliot, and *Jungle Pilot*, by Russell Hitt. Others killed in 1956 were Plymouth Brethren missionaries Pete Fleming and Ed McCully, and Roger Youderian of gospel Missionary Union.

For Clapp, it was an emotional moment when he first saw the plane's remains in the front yard of an Indian home. Surrounded by two dozen Indians and a few visiting missionaries, he moved the control throttle forward. "Just think," he said, "the last person to move that throttle in flight was Nate Saint."

Clapp said he hopes that some of the remainder of the plane can be restored and used as a museum piece to instill a vision for foreign mission work in a younger generation.

Clapp led a group of workers, including two sons and a grandson of Nate Saint, back to the isolated beach site to recover additional sections of the plane and to search for the engine, which was left behind by the original search party in the 1950s because of fear of another violent attack.

Using metal detectors, Clapp, missionaries and Huaorani searched for the beach and river bottom for five days before additional remains were found scattered kilometers apart. The Clapp group was unable to find the engine, in part because, during the 37 years since the incident, the river and its sand beaches have shifted course and location.

Clapp said he now believes the engine is in the middle of the river and perhaps will be easier to locate during dry season next January when the river will be much lower.

While searching for the plane's remains, Steve and Phil Saint, sons of Nate Saint, met with an 82-year-old Huaorani Indian who participated in the killing of the missionaries in 1956. After a half-hour conversation, the three men stood with their arms around one another as photographs were taken. The Indian had become a Christian convert in the years following the slayings.

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