

## THE STAMS

The postmaster in the small town of Miaoshou in Anhui province recognized the Chinese Communist Army's foreign prisoners. They were John and Betty Stam, missionaries with the China Inland Mission (CIM) in the area.

"Where are you going?" he asked John. "We do not know where they are going," John replied, "but we are going to heaven."<sup>[1]</sup>

John Stam was right. The next day—December 8, 1934—he and Betty were led to a hill outside of town and executed. But their story did not end there, nor did the impact of their lives and deaths. While John and Betty Stam entered into their Master's presence, news of the young missionary couple's deaths reverberated around the world. In the 80 years since their martyrdom, the Stams' story has inspired generations of believers to follow in their footsteps to the foreign mission field and in sacrificial service to Christ.

### Prepared for Mission

That Betty Stam became a missionary to China was not surprising. She was the child of Presbyterian missionaries serving there for much of her childhood; in many ways, it was her "home." At the age of 18, Betty—who was fond of writing poetry—penned these lines reflecting her devotion to Christ and submission to his will for her life:

Lord, I give up all my plans and purposes  
All my own desires and hopes  
And accept Thy will for my life.  
I give myself, my life, my all  
Utterly to Thee to be Thine forever.  
Fill me and seal me with Thy Holy Spirit  
Use me as Thou wilt, send me where Thou wilt  
And word out Thy whole will in my life at any cost now and forever.<sup>[2]</sup>

John Stam was born into a Dutch Reformed family in New Jersey. His father was a lay preacher who implored his children to faithfully tell others about the Lord Jesus. John eventually felt called to be a missionary and entered Moody Bible Institute for formal theological training.

It was at Moody that he met Betty. The two often attended the same CIM prayer meeting in Chicago during their time in school there. Not long after graduating from Moody, Betty applied to the CIM; she sailed to China in the fall of 1931. John followed the next summer and the romance blossomed. They were married on October 25, 1933 in Jinan, China.

### Martyrdom in Anhui

Not long after marrying, the Stams moved to the city of Jingde in Anhui Province. Few there had heard the gospel and the young missionaries hoped to partner with the handful of Chinese believers in telling others about the good news of God's grace. In September 1934, the Stams' daughter, Helen Priscilla, was born.

China at the time was a place of turmoil. A civil war between the ruling Nationalist Party (Guomindang) and Communist forces was in its eighth year.<sup>[3]</sup> In the fall of 1934, the Communists' chances looked bleak. Many historians remember the time as when Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communists began its "Long March" from southern China toward the country's northwestern region, but pockets of resistance were also active in central and eastern China, including Anhui.

On December 6, 1934, Communist forces unexpectedly overran Jingde where the Stams were living. The young family did not have enough time to flee the city and was taken prisoner. John Stam quickly wrote a letter to CIM headquarters in Shanghai, alerting them to their situation. The Communists demanded a \$20,000 ransom, which John knew would not be paid. In closing, he wrote, “The Lord bless and guide you, and as for us, may God be glorified whether by life or by death.”[4]

The Stams were taken to nearby Miaoshou, where Betty hid Helen Priscilla before the couple was led to their execution on December 8. A Chinese evangelist found the baby alive a few days later. She was taken to Betty’s parents and was raised by members of Betty’s family.

#### Mobilizing Others

As news of the Stams’ sacrifice spread, John and Betty’s families hoped the young couple’s deaths might be used by God to mobilize others to take their place. “How glad we shall be if through this dreadful experience many souls shall be won for the Lord Jesus!” Peter Stam, John’s father, wrote to friends shortly after John and Betty’s deaths. “How glad we shall be if many dear Christian young people shall be inspired to give themselves to the Lord as never before, for a life of sacrifice and service!”[5]

The families’ hopes were soon fulfilled. At a memorial service in the Stams’ honor in Chicago, 700 Moody Bible Institute and 200 Wheaton College students stood to dedicate themselves to missionary service. Similar to the impact that the deaths of Jim Elliot and his fellow missionaries in Ecuador in 1956 had on the missions movement in the West, the Stams’ martyrdom also was used by God to call many to give their lives to make Christ known where he was not. A tribute to the Stams in the CIM’s publication *China’s Millions* stated:

It has been a long time since any event connected with the mission fields has made so wide and profound an impression in this country. We believe that John and Betty Stam may by their death have spoken even more loudly than by their brief lives of devoted service. Let no one call this ending of their earthly career a tragedy, for in reality it is a triumph.[6]

The same article recorded the emboldened response of a CIM missionary candidate to the news of the Stams’ deaths: “Being human, I naturally dread suffering and distress of the body, and abuse at the hands of wicked men,” wrote the applicant, “but I really believe I have faced all these possibilities and counted the cost. This tragic and terrible happening does not frighten me, but rather makes me re-gird myself with the armor of God.”[7]

The Stams’ story has been recorded in multiple biographies and other works, including *The Triumph of John and Betty Stam* written in 1935 by Geraldine Taylor of the CIM. Eighty years later, the Stams’ story is perhaps not as well known as other, more recent and popularized stories of martyrdom, but their example can still have an impact, said Tim Sisk, Professor of Intercultural Studies at Moody Bible Institute. “We often fool ourselves into thinking that the command to make disciples across the globe can be done with little or no sacrifice,” Sisk said. “The story of the Stams reminds us that it is a war and that the evil one will oppose those who go to make Jesus known. Their story should remind us both of the cost, but also challenge us to wholehearted obedience as the Stams modeled for us.”

– Chad Berry

<https://omf.org/blog/2015/09/04/the-martyrs-example-john-and-betty-stam/>