

Missionaries risk all to witness to cannibals

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In September, 1968, Phil Masters volunteered to hike into a remote mountain valley to reach the Yali tribe of cannibalistic warriors who called themselves "lords of the earth." He knew the risks. So did his wife and children.

On Nov. 20, Phyliss Masters told the Moms Group at Southeast what happened that day. Phil and Phyliss Masters counted the costs when they signed up for mission work in Dutch New Guinea. They would raise their children in primitive villages half a world away from family and friends. They'd give up conveniences such as plumbing, electricity, grocery stores, schools and picturesque churches. Yet it wasn't sacrifices they were counting.

It was the "privilege of taking the Gospel to people who had never heard," Phyliss said.

"We went because we knew that was what God wanted us to do."

In 1961, the Masters settled in the Swart Valley in what is now Indonesia, where more than 12,000 members of a tribe known as the Dani lived. It didn't take long to get used to the sight of boar tusks bored through noses, bows and arrows and skin that glistened with layers of pig grease.



They learned about blood feuds, human sacrifices to evil spirits, fetishes—everyday objects that housed evil spirits—and the gut-wrenching fear of the spirits that overshadowed everything.

Crissie Masters Rask, one of the Masters' children, said that each one in the family knew exactly why he or she was there.

"The overarching theme of my parents' lives was telling people about Jesus," she said. "That was true before we moved to Indonesia, as well as while we were there. We understood that, and we loved our lives there."

Phil helped the Danis with their gardens, built air strips, hiked into unreached valleys to make contact with tribes who had never seen a white man and worked on speaking and writing tribal languages. He built a simple home where Phyliss home schooled the couple's three young children, worked on literacy projects and women's ministry.

Looking back, Phyliss sees that even the tough times were training ground for the future. Lonely days drove her to the Bible, and she memorized a storehouse of verses that God brought to her mind at the right times when she needed them.

She learned to face tough days alone. Phil was away working on an airfield when she had Rob, their fourth baby. Phil heard his son's first cry over the radio.

Phyliss learned that God filled the gaps, and she could handle anything with His help.

Many times Phil looked toward unreached valleys where people had never heard that God loved them. His goal was to reach as many of them as possible.

Phyliss was pregnant with her fifth child in September 1968, when Phil and another missionary, Stan Dale, hiked into the Seng Valley to make contact with another tribe known as the Yali, and to look for a place to build an air strip.

They knew the risks.

The Yalis were masters of jungle warfare who killed and roasted their victims in banana leaves. They pulled their long hair into nets, wore necklaces made of pigs' teeth, rubbed their skin with layers of lard and soot and lived in constant terror of the "kembu" spirits they tried to appease.

When Phil and Stan left, more than 400 Danis, many of them weeping, gathered to see them off.

"Dry your tears," Phil told them. "You have the Gospel. They don't."

In Phil's mind, the decision to go into that valley was that simple.

"Every trek into unreached valleys was dangerous, but God had protected the missionaries in such miraculous ways that we never thought this trip would end any other way," Crissie said. Phyliss recalled holding Phil a few moments longer than usual before he set off down the path. As Phil and Stan hiked through steep cliffs and narrow ledges, they were stalked by hundreds of Yali warriors. Stan tried to frighten them with a handful of Chinese firecrackers, but the bangs brought only temporary reprieve. They were almost through the valley when the warriors ambushed them with bows held high.

Dozens of arrows flew at Stan from all directions. He pulled them out one by one, breaking them and dropping them at his feet until he couldn't keep up with the onslaught. He was still standing when his body was riddled with 50-60 arrows and rivers of blood ran from his wounds. "Fall!" the warriors screamed at him in their native tongue. "Die!"

When Stan finally fell, the warriors turned to Phil. It took almost as many arrows to kill him. Finally, both missionaries lay on the stony beach amid heaps of more than 200 bloody, broken arrows.

The warriors were petrified the missionaries would rise from the dead.

"Brothers, if we go away, they will rise again and continue on their journey," one warrior said.

"And if that happens, all our people will believe the message they bear. They will burn their charms and fetishes that are sacred to the spirits, cut their hair short and wash their bodies clean."

So the warriors beheaded the missionaries, stripped their bodies and cut them to pieces. Several of the killers picked up pieces of the bodies and carried them down the path to their village.

Phyliss and Stan's wife, Pat, were waiting by the radio when they heard that the men had been shot. Until she heard eyewitness accounts from the search party, Phyliss held onto hope that her husband was still alive. She gathered strength from Psalm 18:2: "The Lord is my rock, my fortress, my deliverer ..." It was one of the many verses she'd memorized.

Later, Phyliss answered the call from the rescue party.

"They told us that their bodies had been chopped up and parts of them eaten," Phyllis said.

"When I heard that, the Lord brought a verse to my mind, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body ..."

The murders rocked the villages, the new believers and the missionaries.

Crissie was in the eighth grade when her father was killed.

"We never blamed the Yali," she said. "We knew it was the darkness of how the people lived without Christ."

Phyliss faced huge decisions.

"As I went over all the decisions that I had to make, the Lord reminded me that He promises to be a husband to the widow and a father to the fatherless," Phyliss said. "And I held onto the promise that 'as thy days, so shall thy strength be.'"

She said taking life one day at a time helped her get through the tough times.

"With the Lord's help, I had enough strength for one day," she said "That's all God asks of us. He gives us strength to go on."

Most assumed Phyliss would leave Indonesia after Phil's death, but she decided to stay.

"It seemed a dark picture to be put on the shelf as far as active missionary work went because Phil died," Phyliss said. "We were part of a team taking the Gospel to these people who had never heard. The Lord showed me that not only did I want to stay, but it was His will for us to stay even though I had five children to raise."

Looking back, Crissie believes it was the best decision.

"Living in the valley was all we knew," she said. "I think it would have been more traumatic to leave."

Phyliss prayed that God would use Phil and Stan's death to soften the hearts of the people and focus prayer throughout the world on the Yalis.

Many believed it would take another three or four generations to go back into the valley, but about three months after Stan and Phil were killed, a plane carrying a missionary family, the Newmans, crashed in that same valley.

Only the Newman's 9-year-old son Paul survived by crawling out of the burning plane, and seeking help in the village. He stumbled on the hut of a Yali who had tried to talk the warriors out of killing Phil and Stan. He kept Paul safe until a rescue party reached the site of the wreckage. That opened the door to peaceful contact, and the Yalis, seeing the second coming of missionaries as a sign, asked for missionaries to move into their village.

Five years later, in 1972, the first 35 believers in the Seng Valley were baptized. Two years later, Phyliss went to the site where the men were murdered.

"God's promise even in the dark days is that He will build His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it," she said.

Phyliss continued missionary work in Indonesia for the next 35 years until retiring in 1996. There now are more than 100 churches in the Yali valley. They lead their own churches and send their own missionaries to minister to other unreached people.

Kurt Sauder, who leads Men's Ministry at Southeast, spent a summer in Indonesia almost 20 years ago.

"When we talk about someone who models Christ, we talk about Phyliss Masters," he said.

"God's Word is so anchored in her heart. By the time I got to the Yali valley, it had been transformed. That summer changed how I looked at leadership, missions, my prayer life and goals for my family."