



THE LEGACY OF HOPEVALE MISSIONARIES

December 20, 2018, marked a historic event: the 75th anniversary of the martyrdom of 11 missionaries of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society (ABFMS, now known as International Ministries) in the Philippines during World War II.

This tragedy has deeply affected American and Filipino Baptists alike, and on the anniversary, over 400 people made the pilgrimage to the remote area where these missionaries spent the last months of their lives.

Their story

ABFMS missionaries James and Charma Covell were serving as teachers in Japan when the war broke out. As the country became increasingly militarized, they felt convicted that this conflict ran counter to the teachings of Jesus, and they could not remain silent.

The Covells' open defiance was a source of danger not only to themselves, but also to other Baptists in Japan. For safety, James and Charma were relocated to the Philippine island of Panay, where 19 other ABFMS missionaries had an established ministry. Unfortunately, the Japanese military was not far behind.

With invading forces closing in, 10 of the missionaries decided to stay and surrender. The rest reached out to a Filipino pastor they knew, and he took them deep into the jungle to find a suitable hiding place. They stopped at the bottom of a ravine surrounded by thick forest and called this place Hopevale.

Over the next 20 months, Hopevale became a waystation for Americans fleeing the Japanese forces. Its presence was a closely guarded secret, but the steady stream of refugees was an undeniable risk. Eventually, an American miner was captured, and under torture he gave up the location.

On December 19, 1943, the little camp was overtaken. No one escaped.

The leader of the arresting platoon, a captain, was attempting to contact his superiors about what to do with the missionaries. Before he could proceed, however, his group was intercepted by another platoon—one led by a colonel, a higher-ranking officer. Overruling the captain's protests, the colonel demanded that the prisoners be killed.

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James Covell begged the officers for their lives, indicating that they were missionaries and not soldiers, but this was refused. He asked to be taken to the internment camp. This was also refused. Seeing no other options, he requested a time to prepare for death. This was granted.

The condemned prisoners, 11 adults and one couple's young son, clasped hands and prayed, then lifted their voices to sing a hymn. Finally, James Covell said, "Now we are ready." They were taken to separate sites, two by two, and executed.

Their legacy

As word of this tragedy spread, even as Baptists mourned the loss, people throughout the Philippines were deeply touched by the martyrs' faith and many came to Christ. Even today, this legacy continues to animate the spirit of the Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches.

For the 75th anniversary, the Convention organized a four-day time of remembrance. A group of eight represented IM at the event to commemorate this part of our shared history.

Leslie Turley, area director for Southeast Asia and Japan, recalls, "It was a sobering time as we looked back at the tragic deaths of missionaries who had given their all in service to God and the people of the Philippines. But what shines through is the amazing triumph of our God who lived in the hearts and lives of those who bore witness to his goodness and faithfulness as they went to their deaths singing a hymn of faith."

While few are called to make such a sacrifice, the Hopevale martyrs remind us that we must give witness to the power of the Holy Spirit every day of our lives, no matter the cost. If you are seeking to revitalize the spirit of your church, remember the Hopevale missionaries!

This account is adapted from *No Greater Love: Triumph and Sacrifice of American Baptist Missionaries in WW II Philippines, and the Martyrdom in Hopevale*, published in 2007 by Worldwide Gifts, co-authored by Wilma Ruth Taylor and the Rev. Dr. Elmo D. Familiaran.