

By Bishop John E. McCarthy

A cowboy for Jesus

Eight years ago this month, a small plane piloted by Maryknoll Father Bill Woods of Houston, Texas, smashed into a Guatemala mountain slope at full throttle, killing the missionary and several passengers. Events before and after the crash suggest that the missionary may have been murdered. Bishop John E. McCarthy, auxiliary of the Galveston-Houston Diocese, writes his memories of the life and death of Bill Woods, a close friend of many years.

The last time I saw Bill Woods was early in November 1976. While home on vacation, he had completely reconditioned a plane and was returning to Guatemala through Austin to visit me. In both a mellow and tense mood, he talked long and late into the night. He said he had been called in by the U. S. embassy and given this advice: "Father, we're not going to discuss this with you, but you should get out of the country and, if not, at least move to Guatemala City."

The Guatemalan government evidently was suspicious. Bill was flying his airplane into a remote area (the Ixcán jungle in Northwest Guatemala) where it was claimed there was guerrilla activity. He had settled thousands of Indians in the

Ixcán and did not want to leave, but he had decided to finish his work in a few months and move to Guatemala City.

The next day I drove him to the airport. As I was driving away, I saw Bill taxiing to the main runway. I turned back, got out of the car, walked to the fence and watched until the plane was out of sight. I had never done that before. Three weeks later Bill was killed.

I met Bill when we were seniors in high school. When he came home on vacations from the seminary, we would get together. I was ordained for the diocese in 1956 and he for Maryknoll in 1958, going immediately to Guatemala. I soon became interested in his work and my first effort on his behalf was to write a letter to our high school classmates to raise money to buy him a horse. It always hurt when he said the horse we bought was absolutely useless.

In 1962 he came to Houston in a battered jeep and, after he remodeled it, I agreed to go back with him. We drove past Huehuetenango and up into the mountains to Santa Eulalia, from where it was a 12-hour horseback ride to Bill's parish of Barillas. It was a beautiful sight to see the pastor, returning after a three-month absence, being met on the road by people singing

and carrying torches to lead him into town in a blinding rainstorm.

Bill was complex, a mixture of optimism, faith, skillfulness and naivete that made him think anything was possible. In fact, he often undertook the impossible and accomplished it.

ple and supplies in. Bill developed five small towns, each with about 5,000 residents, its own little church, meeting hall, houses and airfield. To teach his people wood carving, he learned to carve. He helped them improve their agriculture, opened a clinic and served as

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Father Woods founded five jungle towns accessible only by plane.

For example, he went on vacation to the (Guatemalan) coast, met some crop dusters, learned to fly and returned with a pilot's license three weeks later. While establishing colonies in the jungle, he would locate an area to settle, buy it from the government, get help to clear a landing field, then start flying peo-

the doctor. He could suture a bad machete cut and extract teeth. Later, he was their legal counsel (getting deeds for the lands settled).

The naivete, physical skill, the "I can do anything attitude," a happy, half-ludicrous smile—all contributed to the image of Bill Woods. Maybe coming from Texas helped,

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too. Anyone who wanted things done in a neat, organized way, with reports filled out in triplicate found Bill impossible. He wasn't afraid of pain or death. And no sacrifice for his people was too great.

Extraordinarily generous, he would give away anything he had and possibly some things you had. When his father died in 1976 of a heart attack, Bill, a marvelous opportunist, preached at the funeral and took up a collection for Guatemala's earthquake victims. Over the next few days he raised \$18,000 to \$20,000 to buy corrugated metal to get people under a roof before

the rainy season began. He had an intense love for his family. His father was a strong-willed Irishman while Mrs. Woods was serenity itself, despite family tragedy. One son was retarded; another died in an auto accident two or three years before Bill was killed, and then she lost her husband.

I went to visit Bill in Guatemala about five times, the first in 1962, the last in 1970. Once he inadvertently sent our flashlights, food and water with Indians walking home by another route while we rode horseback. That meant 10 to 14 hours with no food or water. Then my horse collapsed on me in a pouring rain, pinning my legs and refusing to get up. Bill put me on his

Father Woods baptizing an infant in one of the jungle towns he established in the Ixcán for close to 25,000 landless peasants.

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These Ixcán pioneers are either dead or living as refugees, mainly in Mexico. Thousands were massacred by the Guatemalan army, their towns burned.

horse and walked the last two miles in the dark.

Bill Woods was apolitical. He didn't care who was president or who ran the army. All he wanted to do was help people. When he spoke to mission groups in Houston he talked about the injustice in the lives of the Indians but it wasn't in a political context—only that one group of people had power and they despised and looked down on the other group. I think if anyone asked why he went to the missions, he would have said to ride horses, work on a motorcycle, enjoy the

freedom and openness he found in his life. In many ways, Bill was a cowboy, a cowboy for Jesus.

He built tremendous support from Texans and fascinated them with his programs. At the time of Bill's death we had a memorial Mass at Holy Ghost Church in Houston. The body wasn't there, the family wasn't there, nobody knew that he might have been murdered, and yet 1,000 people came.

I gave the homily and told a story about a Mass celebrated in a hot, crowded Guatemalan hut. Several of us priests divided one set of vest-

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ments. The rain was pouring through the roof but all those Indians were singing their hearts out. We were covered with mud, but the church was alive.

Seven years after Bill's death we had a Mass to celebrate the 25th anniversary of his ordination and 700 people turned out. At that point he had not lived in the city for 32 or 33 years, which tells you a lot about his reputation. I preached at that Mass

too but I had trouble because it was so sad. He had made the difference in the lives of so many people.

Bill was a wonderful example of the best of the old Church and the best of modern dimensions of missionary work. His interest in bringing people to a knowledge of God, Jesus and the Church was very traditional. His concern about their economic development, their health, their right to own property, to be productive, to be treated with dignity was very progressive. He operated out of a big heart. □

Father Woods relaxing in jungle clearing. After raising money to purchase uncleared land from the Guatemalan government, he secured titles for the Ixcán cooperatives.

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