



# The Martin & Gracia Burnham Foundation

In Support of: Missionary Aviation Tribal Missions The Persecuted Church Muslim Ministries

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## A Christmas Remembered



The last couple of years, every time the holiday season rolls around, I can't help but recall our Christmas on the island of Basilan. We had been held hostage for 7 months by that time and had been roaming coast to coast trying to avoid the military who were searching for us, trying to rescue us.

There were times that we would show up in a place that we recognized—a place where we had been before. At first that was comforting because we would say, "Oh, we've been here before!" and we would know just which trees were perfectly spaced to put up our hammock because we had done it in just that spot before. Then, as the months wore on, it became discouraging because we would recall, "Oh yes. We've been here 4 times before. Remember the last time we left here we said, 'I hope we never end up here again? I hope we are out before then!'"

It was almost Christmas 2001 when we came upon such a camp. I never liked this particular place. It made me nervous. For one thing, we were very near to civilization. Secondly, we camped very near a wide well-traveled trail. You could see that it was used often by many people and I always wondered what we were doing camping there. I didn't feel safe at all.

By safe—I guess I mean—safe from the prospect of being found by the military. We had been in at least 10 gun battles by then and I hated those. When the military would find us, there would be a shoot out with heavy automatic gunfire and some of the Abu Sayyaf would get wounded or killed and the same would happen to the military, I had to assume. Gun battles were unnerving to say the least.

So we found ourselves camped in the forest near this main trail. When we got our hammock situated, I saw that growing right there beside the hammock was a scrawny—maybe one foot high—little evergreen tree. Those were not very common in that area and I told Martin, "This will be our Christmas tree." Earlier that day, while we were hiking, I had found a discarded blue plastic bag with lots of holes (almost shredded in places) but I had picked it up thinking that it might be useful for something. I decided that the plastic bag would be the decorations for our "Christmas tree". I planned to make long strips of plastic and drape them over the few branches of the tree like you do tinsel.

But before Christmas day, one afternoon, one of the guys out on duty came running back to camp saying quietly, "sundalo, sundalo!" (soldiers, soldiers!) It became perfectly silent as everyone began quickly packing everything up. Martin took down our hammock first and shoved it into our backpack. We grabbed everything else and soon were headed through the jungle away from there.

As we ran silently down the trail, I began to pray as I always did, "O God, please keep us safe. Please don't let the shooting start in." And I

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Christmas  
Memory

# Merry Christmas

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have to wonder how many of you were praying for us right then when we needed it. **If I haven't thanked you yet for praying, I want to now. If I have, I'm doing it again—because every time you prayed for us, we needed it!**

We stopped that night beside a river and the next day began one of the hardest hikes we ever took straight up a mountain. Up on the ridge though, we must have been safe because we stayed there several weeks.

I had been praying for a long time for something to give Martin for Christmas . . . a piece of candy that I could save to give him or something. But there was nothing.

So—I decided I would recite the Christmas story to him on Christmas Day and I began rehearsing it in my head so I could remember it. ***“And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria. And all went to be taxed—everyone into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee out of the city of Nazareth into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem (because he was of the house and lineage of David), to be registered with Mary, his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was that while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”***

There were places that I would get totally stuck trying to remember that passage. And for hours I would think and rethink until the proper wording would come to me and by Christmas Day I was able to recite the whole thing to Martin. I remembered the following verses about how the shepherds

were told by the angels to go to Bethlehem and find the child and how they came with haste and found Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus.

We sat on the jungle floor that day and reminisced about past Christmases—things we had done—what special gifts we had received as children. And it was a good day. What made it a good day, though, wasn't necessarily the absence of a gun battle or that we got some food that day. And it wasn't decorations and glitter and gifts that usually accompany Christmas. What made it good was the reminder that “Unto you is born...A Savior.” It was the best news ever to be heard by human ears and we could identify with that group of shepherds spending the night outside underneath the stars. We experienced “Peace on Earth” in the midst of our dark night of difficulties because of the reminder that God was with us.

This Christmas I don't plan on being in the jungle! I plan on being with my three kids and my awesome daughter-in-law! This is such a wonderful gift!

God has given us many gifts, hasn't he? We are surrounded by friends and loved ones. We are enjoying the abundance that He has given us. But most of all, God has met our greatest need—our need for a Savior!

My gift back to Him is my thanks. I thank Him, my good God, for the blessings He has showered on this family. And we offer our lives back to Him to use however He sees fit.

**Merry Christmas to all of you!**

*Gracia*



**Satellite view of the Philippines  
—Basilan is marked with a star.  
Looks pretty small and insignificant  
from this perspective, huh?  
It is mind boggling that  
God is interested in us personally  
— that He cared about Martin and me  
on that Christmas night.  
Image Courtesy NASA Visible Earth**

**We experienced  
“Peace on  
Earth” in the  
midst of our  
dark night of  
difficulties . . .**

**For Donations**  
The Martin & Gracia  
Burnham Foundation  
706 N. Lindenwood  
Olathe KS 66062  
(913) 310-0279

Visit Us on the Web  
[www.graciaburnham.org](http://www.graciaburnham.org)