



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on August 10, 2020

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The Chinese Communist Murder of John Birch 75 Years Later

After Emperor Hirohito announced the surrender of Japan in August 1945, Captain John Birch, a young American intelligence officer in the U.S. Army stationed in China, was directed by General Albert Wedemeyer and others to get to Japanese bases in China as quickly as possible. Once there, they would arrange for the surrender of Japanese forces before Chinese Communist forces could take advantage of the situation.



Birch was ordered to Suchow, located near the Pacific coast, and he set out on August 20, less than a week after Hirohito's capitulation. On August 25, Birch was brutally murdered by Chinese Communists before he could reach his destination. He was first shot in the leg, then bayoneted to death.

Captain Birch was killed by a supposed ally while on a peaceful Army mission, and that fact was buried in a massive coverup by forces within the U.S. government who did not want the American people to know the truth — the communists under Mao Tse-tung were not simply “agrarian reformers,” and they were not our allies. Adeline Gray, a newspaper reporter, wrote Birch's parents that “had not the truth been suppressed, Captain Birch's death would have headlined every newspaper in the United States.”

Had the fact that an American intelligence officer and Baptist missionary was murdered by Chinese Communists been widely known in the United States, it might very well have derailed the effort by conspirators inside the U.S. government to hand China — the world's most populous nation — over to the totalitarian dictatorship of Mao Tse-tung.

Instead of dealing with the hostile China of today, Americans might very well be celebrating decades of friendship with that nation — if only John Birch's murder had not been covered up.

In 1962, the pop group known as the Chad Mitchell Trio released a song poking fun at the anti-communist John Birch Society (parent organization of *The New American*), in which the singers pose as goofy JBS members. In the song, they proclaim, “We only hail our hero from who we got our name. We're not sure what he did, but he's our hero just the same!”

The light-hearted song was actually very popular with Birchers, even being performed at the Society's youth camps for several years, but it raises a very good question.

So what did John Morrison Birch actually do to be honored by having his name used for an organization dedicated to the concept of “less government, more responsibility, and — with God's help — a better world”?

His early life certainly gave no indication that his name would become associated with a society dedicated to educating Americans about the philosophy of limited government — although that was without a doubt the philosophy held to by Birch. His parents were poor missionaries on a mission in India when Birch was born, on May 28, 1918. Bouts with malaria suffered by Birch's father, George,



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forced the family to return to the United States when John was only about two years old, and they went into the fruit-growing business, among other things.

John was a very bright boy. By the age of seven, he had read John Bunyan's Christian classic, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and was a regular reader of *The Saturday Evening Post* and *National Geographic*. He even built his own radio when he was 17.

The Birches had been Presbyterians, but when their church got a "modernist" preacher, they left and joined a Southern Baptist congregation in Georgia. John trusted Christ as his savior, and was baptized at seven. At age 11, he felt the call to be a missionary.

John's exceptionally good grades landed him a scholarship to attend a Southern Baptist college, Mercer, located near his home in Georgia. He had expected it to be a fundamental Baptist school, but he was shocked when many of the professors espoused views that were like the liberal views that had caused his family to leave the Presbyterian Church. Birch was nevertheless a star on the debate team and was an actor in the Mercer Players. His English professor urged young Birch to pursue a career as a professional writer. Dean John B. Clark recommended him for consideration as a Rhodes Scholar. He graduated *magna cum laude*.

But the school's liberalism troubled him. In a 1939 sermon, he recalled, "I knew there was modernism at Mercer, that they were teaching the Bible was not infallible. I knew I ought to protest, but I kept my mouth shut."

He eventually spoke out against what he considered to be heretical teachings at the Southern Baptist college, and he chose not to seek a missionary appointment from that denomination, but rather attended the newly formed Fundamental Baptist Bible Institute in Fort Worth, Texas, founded by J. Frank Norris. Norris had been a prominent Southern Baptist pastor, but he eventually split from them. Independent Baptist and Bible Baptist churches sprang from his movement. Anxious to get to the mission field, Birch finished the two-year coursework in only one year.

Birch Arrives in China

It was as an independent Baptist missionary that Birch traveled to China, which had been fighting off the Japanese invasion for nearly a decade. Once in China, he launched into the difficult task of learning the Chinese language, which did not have an alphabet. Instead, there were thousands of different pictographic characters. Despite the difficulty, within six weeks, he could successfully converse with Chinese people, and he eventually became an expert in Mandarin Chinese.

Birch's missionary work quickly produced a huge harvest of souls. His first sermon in China garnered 15 converts. He preached and shared the gospel every chance he had, even converting soldiers in the Nationalist Army of Chiang Kai-shek. Despite letters from Norris admonishing John to be careful in the war-torn country, Birch sneaked past Japanese lines to preach the gospel to the Chinese.

He had a meager income of only \$50 a month, so friends and family would sometimes send him additional money — which he used to purchase New Testaments to give to Chinese soldiers, food for fellow Christian believers, and other expenses associated with evangelism efforts. He did buy himself a radio, on which he could listen to KGEI out of San Francisco. One night, he was delighted to hear his parents speak about his work in China.



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China's government at the time was quite open to the gospel. The ruler of China, Chiang Kai-shek, was a convert, who had written a book about it, *Why I Believe in Jesus Christ*. Had the country been at peace, and had the communists not been threatening the survival of the Nationalist government, China might have become one of the world's leading Christian nations, with Birch among a multitude of missionaries.

But the war made it increasingly difficult for the young missionary, as it caused his already limited funds to often be cut off. He suffered bouts of malaria, as well as homesickness. He briefly became engaged to a Scottish nurse, but broke the engagement for fear he was endangering her life.

Birch Meets Doolittle

Then, in April 1942, Birch decided to eat in a Chinese inn in a small village. While eating his spartan meal of boiled red rice, green bamboo shoots, and a meat scrap, a Chinese man sat down across from him, and asked in a whisper, "You American?"

Birch nodded, and the man asked for him to follow him. After quickly finishing the meal, Birch followed the man to the nearby Lan River. They came to a sampan river boat, at which time the Chinese man hopped on board. John followed. The man turned and said quietly, "Americans."

Birch was skeptical, but knocked on the door of the boat and asked, "Are any Americans in there?"

He was surprised when he heard an American voice. "No Japanese could make up an accent like that!" in response to Birch's Southern accent.

Inside, he saw five men stuffed into a little hold. The commanding officer introduced himself. "Colonel James H. Doolittle, United States Army Air Force. The boys and I just delivered a little present to Tojo, and we're having a bit of trouble getting back home."

The famous Doolittle raid over Tokyo had done little damage on the Japanese capital, but it had strongly boosted morale inside the United States and among American fighting men in the Pacific. It had also enraged the Japanese, who wanted to track down and execute those who had carried out the bombing mission on their nation's capital city.

Doolittle explained that after bombing Japan, they had no place to land, and after running out of fuel, had to bail out. Birch told him that the Japanese had spies all around the area, and were no doubt looking for them. He offered to take them to Lanchi, where he knew some Chinese officers who could then get them to Chungking. Over the next several days, Birch worked feverishly to find more of Doolittle's raiders and get them to safety.

The rescue efforts that John Birch performed for Colonel Doolittle eventually brought him into contact with General Claire Chennault of the famed Flying Tigers. By this time, Birch reasoned that his missionary efforts to the Chinese would be futile unless the Japanese invaders were expelled, so he tried to enlist in the military as a chaplain to help the American war effort. But because of his knowledge of the Chinese language, he was used as a translator for Doolittle, and later became an intelligence officer for Chennault.

Writing in *20th Century Heroes*, a collection of essays from this magazine by various authors, Steve Bonta noted, "But Birch's contribution to the war effort in China went beyond the accurate and reliable intelligence [that he would often offer later, as an intelligence officer]. The brave young missionary also



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set up a network for rescuing fliers shot down behind enemy lines. About 90 percent of Chennault's downed fliers were rescued by Birch's system."

Chennault noted that this success was "the highest percentage of any war theater." He added, "I cannot praise his work sufficiently." Chennault was not the only American officer to praise Birch. Lieutenant Arthur Hopkins recalled of Birch: "Without reservation, I will say that he was the most brilliant, finest, most able, bravest officer I ever met."

Birch's abilities in the intelligence field were so great that he was offered a position in the war-time intelligence arm of the U.S. government, the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency. But Birch had no desire to work for the OSS, so it was arranged that he would serve as "officially on loan" to the agency, as opposed to being formally transferred.

So Birch became part of the U.S. Army as an intelligence officer, with the rank of lieutenant, being later promoted to captain. He was sent to the coast to organize Chinese intelligence to aid the American war effort, particularly the Army Air Force. Bravely going behind Japanese lines, he disguised himself as Chinese, and preached on Sundays, when and where he could. This was increasingly difficult, as the Japanese made it a practice to burn any buildings used by Christians.

He recruited Chinese people into his intelligence network, which often required great physical stamina. He once rode a Mongol pony 60 miles through a snowstorm, in a 300-mile trek to the battle front. Once at his destination, he radioed information back to Colonel Wilfred Smith, using the prearranged code words, "I've got the table laid for the banquet. When can I spread the cloth?"

That night, Birch and Chinese guerrillas spread white strips of cloth on the ground pointing to the target, which was soon bombed by a P-40, which Birch coded as a white Pontiac.

Birch's intelligence operation provided invaluable defensive operations, as well. Another time, after a Chinese lookout ran up the *jing bao* ball on the flag pole — meaning that Japanese planes were headed in the direction of Hengyang to attack American forces — Birch and others ran to their operations shack. They radioed that 14 Japanese bombers were on their way, with 16 Zeros escorting them. Four P-40s were able to intercept them, and catch them totally by surprise. The Japanese bombers turned tail, and the P-40s went after the Zeros. After a brief dogfight, the Zeros also flew away.

Despite this and many other daring and successful intelligence exploits, Birch longed for the end of the war, so he could return to his calling of preaching the gospel. But he was concerned that even after the defeat of Japan, China would not be safe. He feared that the Chinese Communists were more interested in fighting the Nationalist government of China than the Japanese invaders, and he was not bashful in saying so to just about anyone who would listen. Five days before his death, Birch wrote in a letter to Lieutenant Bill Drummond, "Sooner or later we'll have to fight them."

The Murder of John Birch

In his essay "The War Weary Farmer," written in April 1945, Birch said, "I want to reach the sunset of my life sound in body and mind, flanked by strong sons and grandsons, enjoying the friendship and respect of neighbors, surrounded by fertile fields and sleek cattle, and retaining my boyhood faith in Him who promised a life to come."

But it was not to be. On his way to Suchow by railroad handcar, he encountered a hostile band of



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communists. Although Lieutenant Tung of the Nationalist Chinese army (who was with Birch) attempted to negotiate with the Communist Chinese, he was unsuccessful, and Birch was murdered.

Americans, however, would not learn of this until years later, as communist sympathizers inside the U.S. government classified the documentation. A letter from Major General Edward Witsell to Birch's mother said only that he was killed "as the result of stray bullets fired by communist forces." But General Wedemeyer had already — only five days after the murder — confronted Mao Tse-tung about the incident. Mao promised to punish the guilty parties (though it is extremely unlikely this ever happened).

Then, on September 5, 1950, Senator William Knowland, a Republican from California, took to the Senate floor to denounce the coverup, blaming pro-communists inside the State Department. Robert Welch, a strongly anti-communist candy manufacturer (Sugar Daddies, Sugar Babies, and Junior Mints), after reading with indignation about Birch's murder and its subsequent coverup by the U.S. government, proclaimed Birch the first American casualty of the Cold War.

He soon wrote the book *The Life of John Birch* and later named his anti-communist organization — [The John Birch Society](#) — in his honor. Though some have speculated that Birch would not have approved of the use of his name for the group, the evidence is overwhelming that he would have been deeply honored. A review of his life; the anti-collectivist philosophy expressed in his short essay "The War Weary Farmer"; his own words in his letters and to others, voicing his concern about communism; and the fact that his parents not only approved, but became life members of the JBS, would indicate that Birch would have been an enthusiastic supporter of the organization that bears his name.

Birch's views seem to match perfectly with the society that bears his name. In his "War Weary Farmer" essay, Birch wrote, "I want of government only protection against the violence and injustices of evil or selfish men." This seems to line up closely with the JBS motto, "Less Government, More Responsibility, and — With God's Help — a Better World."

In a letter Birch wrote to an aunt in 1942, he certainly had concerns about the collectivist and globalist direction in which the world was headed. He told her that "the world stage" was being set for "the rise of the anti-Christ." It is almost certain that Birch would have heartily endorsed the program of The John Birch Society, which has fought against "the federations" of the evil world system he denounced in 1942. While Birch's life was summarily ended through what could only be described as an execution by communists in 1945, this writer and other believers familiar with the life of John Birch have no doubt he is presently enjoying the fruits of what he anticipated in "The War Weary Farmer," of reaching the end of his earthly life, "retaining [his] boyhood faith in Him who promised a life to come."

All that Birch's mother, Ethel, ever received back from China by the government he served was his limited personal effects — a well-marked Scofield Reference Bible, a Chinese Gold Air Hero medal (the highest award that could be awarded to a foreigner), and a few other personal items. Despite her asking for it, his own nation denied him even a Purple Heart, arguing that he was not killed in battle by the enemy, but rather by "our allies."

The body of John Morrison Birch lies in the soil of the China he sought to lead to Christ, but his spirit is with his Lord. And the society that bears his name continues to carry on the goals of that earthly life, fighting for a government limited to "only protection against the violence and injustice of evil or selfish men."

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