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The John Birch Society

A REPORT

## John Birch: Did He Seek Death?

By Wesley McCune

The author, a former correspondent for *Time* and *Newsweek*, is director of Group Research, Inc., a Washington organization that monitors right-wing activities.

IN 1954, a candy manufacturer named Robert Welch wrote a book, "The Life of John Birch," which told how an American Baptist missionary who had turned intelligence officer in China during World War II became the first casualty of World War III—the war against communism. Birch was killed by Chinese Communist soldiers 10 days after Japan's surrender on Aug. 14, 1945.

In 1958, Welch organized the John Birch Society, and he remains its leader. Several governors have proclaimed John Birch Day on the late captain's birthday, and Birch's parents participate in the society's activities. When the organization's existence became public, in 1961, most of the publicity centered on Welch's charge that President Eisenhower was a "dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy," but there was also a little speculation about who Capt. John Birch really was.

A few authorities suggested that he had provoked his own death, but the government refused to make public an official version. Welch injected the charge that Washington suppressed the news of Birch's death because of Communist influence. This was part of his "grand conspiracy" theme, and his basic speech during the early months of 1962 included this passage:

"With his death and in his death the battle lines were drawn, in a struggle from which either communism or Christian-style civilization must emerge with one completely triumphant and the other completely destroyed. Partly for these reasons but even more be-

cause John Birch—in all of his short but outstanding career—so typified the best of America, we have named our organization in his memory."

A 16-page tabloid distributed by the Society in 1965 through millions of Sunday newspapers used a color photograph of Birch in uniform on the cover and opened with two pages depicting him as a martyr to the causes of the United States and Christianity. Included in the publication was a picture of his flag-draped casket.

### Secret Documents

REQUESTS FOR Army records on the circumstances of Capt. Birch's death were refused at the time on the grounds that they were classified "secret." However, persistent efforts by Samuel J. Archibald, director of the Washington office of the Freedom of Information Center at the University of Missouri, have resulted in declassification of the documents after nearly 27 years.

About 50 pages of official reports make it clear that Capt. Birch, whose record had been very good, provoked a group of Chinese Communist soldiers into killing him and almost killing his Chinese adjutant, a Lt. Tung, by being demanding, threatening and arrogant.

Nine days after Japan's surrender, Capt. Birch was assigned to lead a small group of U.S., Chinese and Korean personnel to Suchow in the interior of China to collect Japanese files and check the airport for the Office of Strategic Services. Although the war was supposedly over, this territory was occupied by Japanese and their puppets and there was still hostility.

Nationalist forces under Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek had been fighting the Japanese, as had Communist Chinese forces under Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-Lai.

Gen. Albert C. Wedemeyer, Commander of U.S. forces in China, was

also chief of staff to Chiang, and the United States had an observer group at Communist headquarters in Yen-an. The two Chinese forces were not cooperating, but nevertheless, both were supposed to know the location of American missions. In this case they didn't, however because the area was occupied by the Japanese.

### "Don't Mind If They Kill Me"

THE BIRCH GROUP found the Japanese cooperative the first day of the mission, but was warned of danger if it proceeded into the Communist area. Despite the warning, Birch led his group forward, and they encountered some Communist troops. Birch, who was fluent in Chinese, was allowed to pass, but according to the records, Lt. Tung noticed that Birch's attitude was "a little severe." He told Birch he thought his conduct was "dangerous," but the captain replied: "Never mind, I want to see how the Communists treat Americans. I don't mind if they kill me, for America will then stop the Communist movement with atomic bombs."

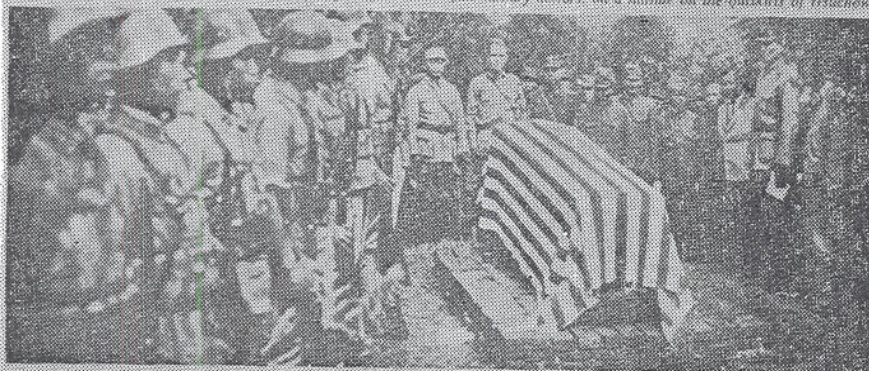
Nevertheless, Birch let Tung do the talking to the next two groups, and there were no incidents. At Hwang Kao railroad station that afternoon, the Chinese were more belligerent. Tung reported that fact to Birch who reacted by taking a hands-on-hip stance and telling one of the Chinese: "Well! So you want to disarm us. At present the Americans have liberated the whole world, and you want to stop us and disarm us. Are you bandits?"

By this time, the Birch party was surrounded by 60 or 70 armed Chinese. After some delay, they told the party it could proceed, but Birch refused to be satisfied until taken to the commanding officer. When a Communist soldier started to lead them back to where they had just been, Birch grabbed him



*Put to the*

Burial of Captain Birch, with full military honors, on a hillside on the outskirts of Hsuehchow.



## WHAT HE DIED FOR

*"He died at the hands of the Red Chinese - first victim in a long, long war."*

During the long war Captain Birch never lost sight of his spiritual goal. On August 13, 1945, he wrote in the last letter of his life: "Yesterday, Sunday morning, I held a service especially thanking God for bringing us to the eve of victory. . . . Father, do not worry about my turning back in the furrow. As it pleases God to use my voice for preaching His Gospel, I expect to be doing that."

Twelve days later John lay dead in a ditch near the town of Hsuehchow - shot and cruelly bayoneted by "our Chinese Communist allies." His death was known and mourned all over China, for he had become a symbol of Christianity, of true brotherhood and humility, and of the goodness and strength of America. The cruel murder of Captain Birch was a grim warning by the Red Chinese to all who would oppose their 20th century barbarism.

On November 16, 1945, Adeline Gray, who was herself a newspaper woman as well as former instructor at Nankai, wrote John's parents that "Had not the truth been . . ."

at the back of the collar and said: "After all, what are you people? If I say bandits, you don't have the appearance of bandits. You are worse than bandits."

### Left for Dead

A SHORT DISTANCE farther, the leader of about 20 armed Communists ordered his men to load their guns and disarm Birch. Tung tried to intervene again, but was shot. He lost consciousness after hearing another shot and hearing Birch say he was hit in the leg and could not walk. A third shot apparently killed Birch, and he was bayoneted as well. Both men were left for dead, but Tung was rescued and returned to an American base, where he was interrogated at length. He lost an eye and a leg.

The others in the Birch group were detained nearly two months, and reported later that they were treated fairly well. Three of the Americans made out a joint report which substantiated Tung's, especially as to Birch's attitude and the warnings he had been given.

Birch's body was recovered from a shallow grave, and after a Catholic service was buried with military honors on a hillside near Suchow.

A 10-page report on the incident, submitted to Gen. Wedemeyer by the judge advocate for the theater and dated Nov. 13, 1945, relied substantially on the eyewitness accounts by Lt. Tung. It concluded that "although Capt. Birch's conduct immediately prior to his death indicated a lack of good judgment and failure to take proper precautions in a dangerous situation, neverthe-

less the actions taken by the Chinese Communist Army personnel fell short of according the rights and privileges due even to enemy prisoners of war and constituted murder." It added: "The shooting was done maliciously . . . the killing was completely without justification."

With that conclusion, however, was the following statement: "Since the presence of the Birch party in the area had not been announced to the Communists, Nationalists or the Yen-an Observer Group . . . and because the Communists were still in battle action, it was entirely proper for them to hold Birch and Tung until satisfied that they were friendly groups. Further, in view of Birch's attitude and actions, the Communists were to a degree properly resentful at being termed 'bandits' and were not inclined to be immediately helpful."

### "Belligerent, Contemptuous"

THE REPORT also concluded: "From T. Tung's testimony, it seems clear that Birch was in no mood to treat with the Communists and that his actions toward them were belligerent and contemptuous."

Gen. Wedemeyer wrote Aug. 31 to Mao Tse-tung about the incident, expressing gratitude for past cooperation and asking for a prompt investigation report. A reply from Yen-an asserted that Birch and Tung had approached from the enemy's direction, had cursed the Communists who challenged them, and were shot in self-defense.

Wedemeyer also wrote Chiang

Kai-shek, asking for help in bringing the perpetrators to justice. Several months later, having received no reply, Wedemeyer reminded the generalissimo of the request and received a message that the Nationalists had repeatedly asked the Communists for help in court-martialing those responsible but had received no response. However, the message went on, the matter was being taken up with Chou En-lai.

That was March 15, three years before Chou and Mao drove Chiang (and the United States) out of China.

About 10 years later, Wedemeyer wrote an article for Robert Welch's new journal, One Man's Opinion, and soon was listed on its editorial advisory committee. In 1958, Welch secretly organized the John Birch Society and changed the name of his magazine to American Opinion. Wedemeyer remained an adviser through the October issue of 1961, several months after the right-wing organization became public, but a few weeks later he told Newsweek magazine that he had left Welch.

"I knew John Birch as a captain in China," he said. "He provoked the attack on himself; he was arrogant. I warned Welch not to make a hero of Birch. That's why I quit . . . I think Welch is a dedicated, fine American, but he lacks good judgment."

Ironically, the military records which were finally released were held up a few additional days so that their disclosure could not cause embarrassment during President Nixon's trip to China earlier this year.