

Soldier-Missionary

John Birch, fortified by Christian virtue, fought and died in an effort to liberate, in body and soul, China's oppressed masses.

by Steve Bonta

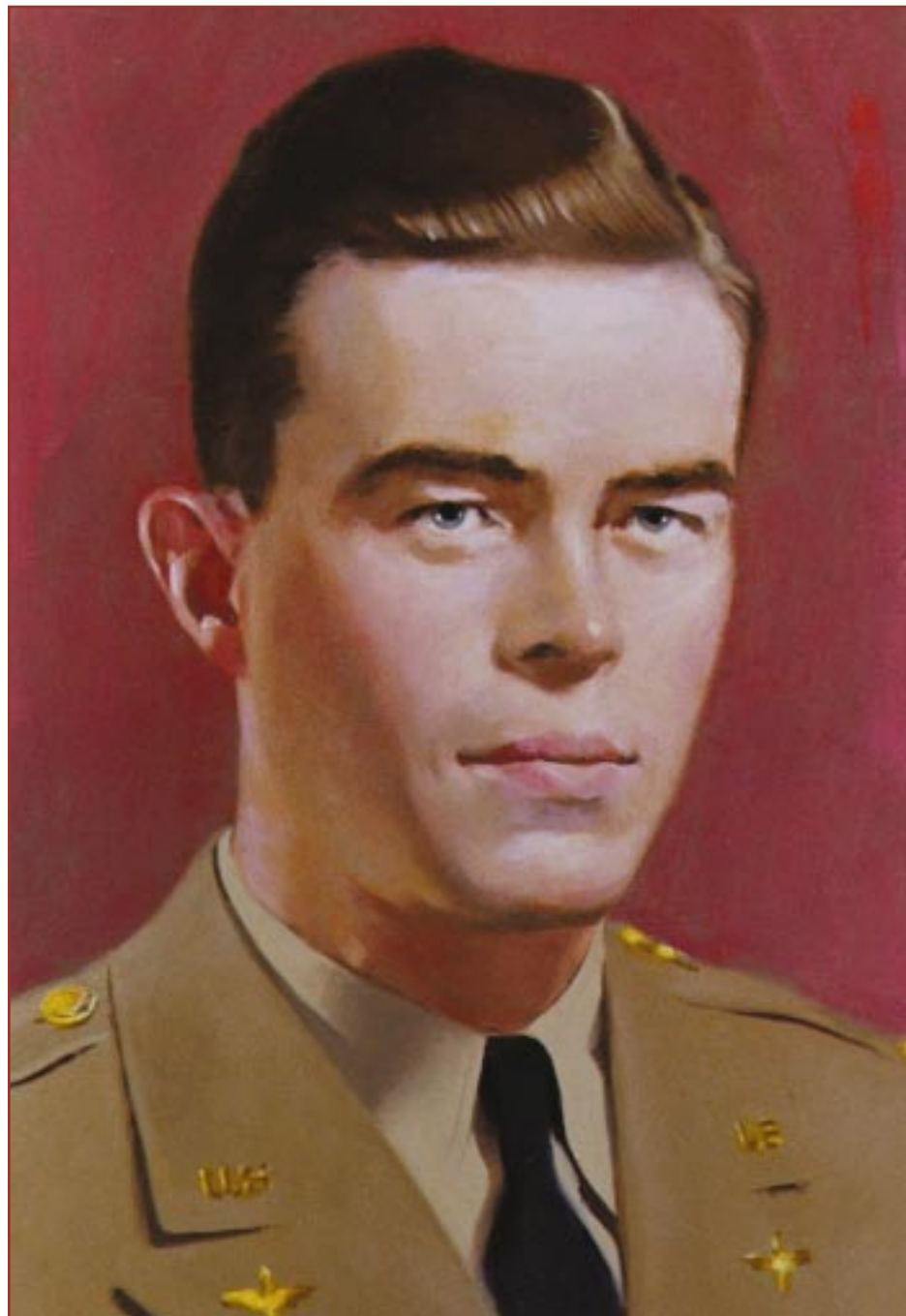
In April 1942, America had been at war more than four months. The long, bloody campaign across the islands of the Pacific lay ahead. Imperial Japan had wrested Singapore from the British, and had expanded her dominions across the Philippines, southeast Asia, the East Indies, New Guinea, and deep into the Chinese mainland. Yet, late in April of that momentous year, a squadron of American bombers, led by Jimmy Doolittle, flew into the heart of this vast empire to conduct an unexpected raid on Tokyo.

The purpose behind Doolittle's daring raid was primarily psychological; it was to show the Japanese that they were not invulnerable on their island fortress, and that, sooner or later, the war would be brought to their doorstep. Doolittle and his men were well aware of the risks of what was potentially a suicide mission. After dropping their payloads they would simply have nowhere to go, except inland over occupied China. They therefore planned to fly westward until their fuel ran out and then bail out, hoping not to fall into enemy hands.

For several crews, the mission turned out badly. Some were captured by the Japanese, and a few perished. Colonel Doolittle and his crew were more fortunate; after bailing out, they were rescued by sympathetic Chinese and smuggled by river into Chekiang Province.

Several days after the raid, at a tiny village somewhere in Chekiang, a curious figure was eating dinner. Tall, spare, and dressed in coolie clothes, he ate native fare uncomplainingly. He spoke Mandarin Chinese with near-native fluency, and was known to the locals as Pai Shang-wei. Yet he was an American, a young Baptist missionary named John Birch.

While Birch was eating, he was approached by a Chinese man who sat at his table unbidden. At length, the local quietly asked the American missionary to follow him outside. After making sure they were unobserved, he led Birch to a sampan



moored inconspicuously on the riverbank nearby. Indicating the boat, the anonymous Chinese simply said, “Americans,” and left the scene.

Birch boarded the sampan and knocked on the door, calling, “Anybody in there? Anybody who can speak English?” The group of Americans hiding inside the boat hesitated. Was this a ruse? At length, convinced by Birch’s authentic southern drawl that he could not be Japanese, they invited him in. Once inside the cramped boat, Birch found Colonel Doolittle and

out protest, confident that, in some small way, he was aiding the cause of righteousness among the oppressed Chinese, a people he had come to love and respect.

John Birch, despite being a red-blooded American boy, seemed to be linked by destiny to Asia. He was born in India in 1918, the oldest son of George and Ethel Birch who, like their son two decades later, were missionaries. When John was only two and a half years old, though, his father’s health forced

China in 1940.

Arriving in Shanghai, Birch began intensive study of Mandarin Chinese, for which he displayed an uncommon aptitude. After six months of training, he was assigned to Hangchow, where he proselytized tirelessly. Hangchow at the time was outside the Japanese occupation zone, so Birch was left alone by the Japanese until the attack on Pearl Harbor. On the very first day of U.S. involvement in the war, however, the Japanese sent a delegation to Hangchow to arrest him, forcing John Birch to flee into the interior.

Unfortunately, he now found himself cut off from contact with the outside world, his funds rapidly dwindling. Finding that no bank would cash his traveler’s checks, Birch lived on his meager savings until April 1942, when, against all odds, he finally managed to cash his traveler’s checks at Chinese Army Headquarters at Hangchow. It was while traveling from Hangchow after receiving the money that John Birch encountered Colonel Doolittle and his crew. Prior to the meeting, Birch had already volunteered to enlist in the U.S. forces in China, preferably as a chaplain. Just days after he helped guide Doolittle and his men to safety, Birch was ordered to report immediately to Chu Chou airbase for duty, no doubt as a result of the glowing report Doolittle gave of him to headquarters.

After a scant four and a half weeks at Chu Chou, where John served as chaplain, he evacuated with several other preachers just ahead of the advancing Japanese, who quickly overran the base. Under orders to report to headquarters at Chungking, Birch made a harrowing overland journey by truck and train to Kweilin, where he had the astounding good luck to run into General Claire Chennault. The general, who was at the time in charge of the famed “Flying Tigers” of the American Volunteer Group (A.V.G.), gave John Birch a lift in an Army transport plane to Chungking. There, Birch was first assigned to serve as translator for Colonel Doolittle. The colonel, still in China, needed help discussing Chinese aviation with the locals, but Birch found the tech-



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Doolittle strikes: Colonel Jimmy Doolittle led an unprecedented attack on Tokyo in April 1942 from the flight deck of the *USS Hornet*. For the crews of Doolittle’s B-25 bombers, it was a one-way trip ending in China. Doolittle himself was met in China by John Birch and led to safety.

four crew members. Exhausted from their ordeal, but otherwise uninjured, Doolittle and his crew were nevertheless in need of a guide and translator to help them get to American headquarters in Chungking. Birch agreed to personally guide Doolittle and his “Tokyo Raiders” to safety, and accompanied them as far as Lanchi. From there, he saw that they had proper directions, told Colonel Doolittle where he could be reached, and left.

Partly as a result of this encounter — which brought to the attention of the American military Birch’s unusual talents with the language and culture — the young missionary soon became a soldier, spy, saboteur, and liaison with Chinese rebel forces. In this capacity, Birch worked primarily behind enemy lines and lived off the land under conditions that most common soldiers would have found unendurable. Yet John Birch bore it with-

them to return to the milder climate of the United States. Young John Birch grew up a devout Southern Baptist, like his parents. By all accounts a sober, responsible youth, John was remembered by his younger siblings for his generosity and kindness. “In our family, we didn’t have much money,” his sister Betty recalled to a reporter many years later, “so John used to buy us younger children candy and gifts at the dime store with money he earned selling newspapers.” Once, John even donated his entire savings to his parents to help defray Betty’s medical bills.

A studious young man, Birch attended Mercer College in Macon, Georgia, where he graduated at the top of his class. While at Mercer, he decided to become a missionary, and enrolled in the Bible Baptist Seminary at Fort Worth, Texas. After completing a two-year curriculum in a single year, John Birch sailed for

nical jargon as incomprehensible in English as in Chinese.

Soon, because of his unique language skills and adaptability, Birch became involved in intelligence work, both in Chungking proper and in the interior, working very closely with General Chennault himself. A natural leader, Birch drew up maps, organized intelligence networks, and, in general, seems to have nearly singlehandedly set up the Intelligence Headquarters for the A.V.G.'s replacement, the China Air Task Force (C.A.T.F.).

In 1943 Birch was sent to Changsha as a liaison and intelligence officer. He not only established an unending flow of intelligence on Japanese troop movements, but also developed a system to coordinate American air support for Chinese forces engaging the Japanese. Equipped with a field radio and a growing network of Chinese infiltrators and informants, Birch efficiently located enemy ammunition dumps, airfields, howitzers, and other objects of strategic importance, and, using a portable radio, directed American planes to these targets from the ground. On one occasion, when bombers were unable to locate a large, well-camouflaged ammunition dump concealed in the suburb of a small city, Birch slipped back across enemy lines and, flying in the nose of a bomber, personally guided the pilots to their target.

Birch's network of Chinese guerrillas and saboteurs set up posts along the Yangtze, to monitor the movements of Japanese naval forces and the shipping of supplies. General Chennault, in his autobiography, *Way of a Fighter*, lauded Birch as "the pioneer of our field intelligence net." But Birch's contribution to the war effort in China went beyond the collection of accurate and reliable intelligence. The brave young missionary also set up a network for rescuing American fliers shot down behind enemy lines. About 90 percent of Chennault's downed fliers were rescued by Birch's system. According to General Chennault, this incredible success rate was "the highest percentage of any war theater."

Birch spent much of his time in the field, usually disguised as a Chinese coolie. His command of the language had by then improved to the point where he was usually taken for a Chinese from another province. Often his missions involved grueling treks of hundreds of miles through the subtropical heat and humidity of China, living on little more than boiled water or tea with red rice, and enduring occasional bouts of malaria.

Birch the man apparently changed little during all these activities. He remained dedicated to spreading the Gospel, and looked

forward to the war's end when he could return to his proselytizing work full-time. To most of his comrades-at-arms, he was a bit of an oddity: He neither drank nor smoked; and he never used profanity. Yet he was never perceived as self-righteous, even by those who emphatically disagreed with his religious convictions.

More importantly, as far as his military work was concerned, Birch was, in the words of friend Captain Bill Drummond, "absolutely fearless, completely unselfish, never thinking of his personal discomfort or danger." Another friend, Captain James Hart, testified that "where brave men were common, John was the bravest man I knew." "Without reservation," recalled Lieutenant Arthur Hop-



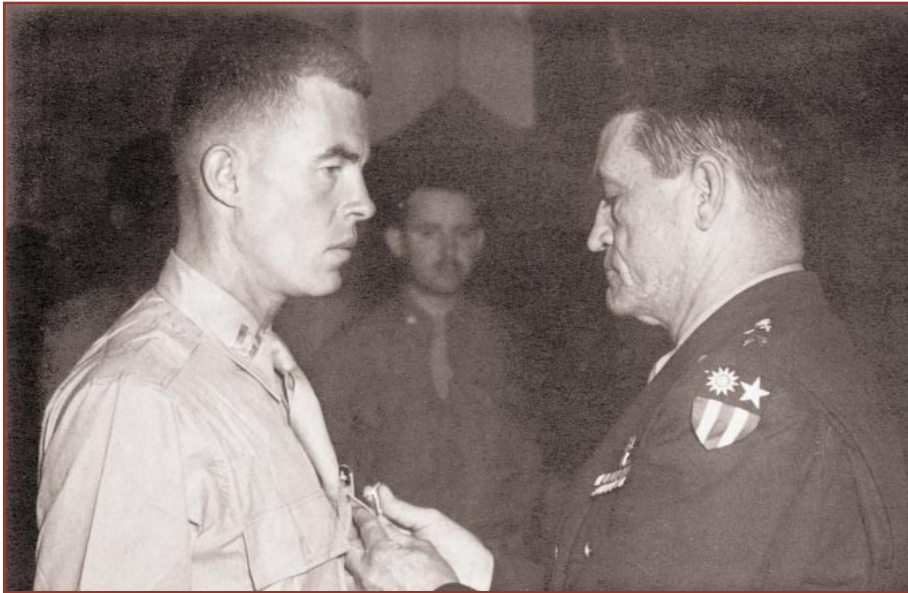
Intelligence pioneer: General Claire Chennault (above) led the Flying Tigers (left) in defense of China. "John Birch," said Chennault, "was the pioneer" of the Tigers' and its successors' "field intelligence net."



kins, "I will say that he was the most brilliant, finest, most able, bravest officer I ever met." High praise indeed for a simple minister of the Gospel who had picked up most of his military training on the fly!

He was a man able to endure not only physical hardship but long stretches of isolation from his compatriots. Birch the ascetic was, except for the comforting

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High praise: Birch was decorated by General Chennault with the Legion of Merit for “meritorious conduct in performance of outstanding service.” Birch’s “devotion to duty was beyond anything that was expected of him. I cannot praise his work sufficiently,” said Chennault.

presence of his God, more often than not a man alone. Because of the secrecy of much of his work, he grew accustomed to keeping his own counsel, disappearing into the hinterland for weeks and months at a time on reconnaissance missions, and returning suddenly without giving any hint of where he had been. We can but imagine, for example, the solitude he endured during a mysterious journey to Tibet, presumably to gather or relay intelligence. Alone he bore the discomforts of another secret mission involving a 60-mile ride through a snowstorm on a hardy Mongolian pony.

This exemplary stoic and patriot, this fine Christian man, was also, as one might expect, a man of high ideals. Those ideals are evident in a touching piece of prose, entitled *The War Weary Farmer*, written by Birch in April 1945. In it, Birch outlined his personal aspirations and his hopes for a better world:

I should like to find the existence of what my father called “Plain living and high thinking.”
I want some fields and hills, woodlands and streams I can call

my own. I want to spend my strength in making fields green, and the cattle fat, so that I may give sustenance to my loved ones, and aid to those neighbors who suffer misfortune....

I do not want a hectic hurrying from place to place on whizzing machines or busy streets. I do not want an elbowing through crowds of impatient strangers who have time neither to think their own thoughts nor to know real friendship. I want to live slowly, to relax with my family before a glowing fireplace, to welcome the visits of my neighbors, to worship God, to enjoy a book, to lie on a shaded grassy bank and watch the clouds sail across the blue.

I want to love a wife who prefers rural peace to urban excitement, one who would rather climb a hilltop to watch a sunset with me than to take a taxi to any Broadway play. I want a woman who is not afraid of bearing children, and who is able to rear them with a love for home and the soil, and the fear of God.

I want of Government only protection against the violence and in-

justices of evil or selfish men.

I want to reach the sunset of 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.

Where can I find this world? Would its anachronism doom it to ridicule or loneliness? Is there yet a place for such simple ways in my own America or must I seek a vale in Turkestan where peaceful flocks still graze the quiet hills?

Birch’s qualities endeared him to General Chennault, who lavished praise and commendations on the young soldier-missionary. A case in point came on July 17, 1944, when Birch was awarded the Legion of Merit “for exceptionally meritorious conduct in performance of outstanding service.” Modestly, he wrote to his mother that “they ought not to cheapen the decoration by giving it when a man merely does his duty. I shall feel guilty in accepting this one....” Birch shouldn’t have felt guilty when General Chennault pinned the medal to his chest. History records Chennault as a great leader and an honest man. One therefore has great difficulty envisioning the general giving a decoration to a soldier undeserving of it. In fact, Chennault once wrote: “I always felt that he would do any job I gave him to do well and he could be depended upon to see things through. His loyalty to me personally and his devotion to duty was beyond anything that was expected of him. I cannot praise his work sufficiently.”

Like most lovers of freedom and religion, Birch was acutely aware of the Communist menace. Before the war had ended, he already saw Communism as a potentially worse enemy than either the Japanese Imperialists or the German Nazis. In a 1942 letter to an aunt, he presciently remarked, “I believe this war and the ensuing federations will set the world stage, as never before, for the rise of the anti-Christ!”

August 1945 was a month of epochal events: The savage beginning of the nuclear age with the detonation of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6th and 9th; the entry into the war against Japan by an opportunistic Soviet Union on the 8th; and the broadcast in Japan on the 15th, V-J Day, of Emperor Hirohito's message of surrender. Ten days later, as the Allies rejoiced in the flush of victory, another critical event occurred. Unlike V-J Day, the event was concealed for years from the American public; had it been otherwise, this seemingly minor tragedy might have rerouted the whole course of history in the postwar 20th century.

On August 25, 1945, a small group of American and Chinese soldiers under the command of John Birch, who had been promoted to captain, left a surrendered Japanese garrison and proceeded by railroad handcar toward the city of Hsuchow. About noon, they reached a section of track that was being torn up by Communist guerrillas. After a tense confrontation, Birch persuaded the Communists to allow his party to pass.

After another hour's travel, though, Birch and his party encountered a second band of Communists. This group was more hostile, but a member of Birch's party, Lieutenant Tung of the Nationalist Chinese army, still attempted to negoti-

ate an agreement with the Communists allowing Birch and his small team to pass. The negotiations failed, leading to the murder of Captain Birch, the attempted murder of Lt. Tung, and the capture of the remainder of Birch's party.

On what was thought to be his deathbed, an ailing Lt. Tung recounted to Lt. William T. Miller — a friend of Birch and a fellow intelligence agent in China — the tale of the Communist attack. After the Communists stated their intention to disarm the Americans, Birch refused, stating, "well so you want to disarm us. Presently the whole world has been liberated from the enemy and you people want to stop and disarm us." Birch then demanded to see the Communist leader responsible for the order to disarm the Americans and the Communist soldiers agreed, taking Tung and Birch with them. After repeatedly failing to be brought to the Communist commander, Birch, exasperated, grabbed a Communist soldier by the back of his collar and said: "you are worse than bandits." The Communist soldier did not respond and the group walked a little way further. Then someone called out: "Come over here, this is our responsible man."

Lt. Tung recalls:

This Communist then angrily commanded: "Load your guns and disarm him first," pointing to Capt.

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Birch. Realizing how seriously acute the situation was, I spoke up in desperation saying: "Wait a minute please, if you must disarm him I will get the gun for you lest a grave misunderstanding develop."

At this moment the Communist commander turned and pointed to me ordering, "shoot him first." In an instant I felt a terrible shock and fell to the ground, shot through the right thigh....

Though lying there on the street in a semi-faint, I heard another shot fired and a voice command, "bring him along."

To this I heard Capt. Birch's anguished reply, "I can't walk."

Tung passed out and never saw Captain Birch alive again. Later he was thrown into a ditch along with the dead body of John Birch and left to die. He was severely beaten, suffering from a broken nose and ruptured right eye, as well as from the severe bullet wound in his leg. Gruesome photos taken by Lt. William Miller show the mutilated body of John Birch, his hands bound behind his back as if he had been executed, his face destroyed by multiple bayonet thrusts. A second bullet may have passed through his skull from back to front.

Some have speculated that Birch, through a belligerent attitude, brought about his own death. A headline in the August 13, 1972 edition of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* went so far as to state: "John



Elements of success: Birch (second from left) achieved success in China due to his fine Christian character, his language skills, and his affection for the Chinese people. "I will say that he was the most brilliant, finest, most able, bravest officer I ever met," said Lt. Arthur Hopkins.

Birch Aroused Chinese Reds Into Killing Him.” Lt. General Charles B. Stone III, former commander of Birch’s outfit — the 14th Air Force, which had replaced the C.A.T.F. on March 10, 1943 — dismissed such allegations as spurious years before. In a November 21, 1961 letter to *Newsweek*, Stone defended Birch’s handling of the situation: “What else should an American officer do in these circumstances?” Stone asked. “Perhaps any argument with an organized Communist group is useless, but this should not inhibit an American officer from making the attempt in performance of his duty.”

The death of John Birch, the first American casualty of the Cold War, sent ripples through an American Establishment swooning over Mao Tse-tung and his Communist band of “agrarian reformers.” Mao’s forces could never have defeated Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalists, the greatest force for civilization and liberalization that China had ever seen, if the Nationalists had not already been slated for extinction by socialist elites in the West. With the collusion of State Department subversives, Communists in East Asia had been able to consolidate their gains at war’s end. Communist Russia, which had opportunistically declared war on Japan scant days before the Japanese surrender, turned over huge caches of seized Japanese weapons to the Chinese and Korean Communists. American military aid intended for Chiang Kai-shek was blocked by treasonous Leftists in Washington bent on hastening the Communist apocalypse in the Far East. In the context of such cynical deceit and viciously duplicitous American foreign policy, the murder of an innocent American at the hands of Communist thugs would be disastrous for America’s media- and State Department-sponsored Mao love-fest.

Accordingly, the Insiders embarked upon a cover-up of the circumstances of John Birch’s death. A 1948 letter from Major General Edward Witsell to John Birch’s mother claimed that John Birch was killed “as the result of stray bullets fired by Communist forces.” Conse-

quently, the letter stated, he was not entitled to the Purple Heart “as he was not killed in action against an enemy of the United States or as a direct result of an act of such enemy.” Mrs. Birch was not informed of the findings of a report compiled under the aegis of General Albert C. Wedemeyer that contained the testimony of Lt. Tung.

General Wedemeyer had also confronted Communist leaders Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai during a meeting



on August 30, 1945, expressing extreme displeasure at the murder of Birch and the capture of his party. Mao and Chou, feigning concern, promised to investigate the matter and punish the guilty parties. However, the U.S. pressed the matter no further. The incident was not mentioned again, the relevant documents were classified, and the official Washington campaign of deception on behalf of the Chinese Communists continued.

Not until the early 1950s did the details of John Birch’s death become public. On September 5, 1950, California Senator William Knowland angrily announced on the Senate floor that the circumstances of John Birch’s death had been deliberately covered up by pro-Communists in the United States government. Had the facts of the Birch incident been known at the time, he charged, Congress and the American people

would never have permitted the betrayal of Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese people. But by then the Communist takeover in China was a *fait accompli*.

John Birch’s life was tragically short. The war-weary farmer never lived to see the “fields and hills, woodlands and streams I can call my own,” or the wife and family he dreamed about. His death, nasty and brutish, came precisely as millions of other servicemen were enjoying reunions with loved ones and laying plans for a brighter future. He was for a time consigned to oblivion in order to serve the twisted interests of diabolically cynical political manipulators. Only the freedom-loving organization that Robert Welch named in his honor brought John Birch to public attention, kept alive the memory of his extraordinary courage and quiet heroism.

In many respects, John Birch is a far more typical hero than others we have profiled in these pages. Unlike the statesmen, the generals, the scholars, the writers, and others who have left their mark on our tragic century, he led a modest, self-sacrificing existence and died a martyr’s death without public acclaim. It never occurred to him to do other than what was right; he was unencumbered by the moral ambiguities associated with power politics. He defined all of his hopes and ambitions in terms of serving his God, his family, and his fellow men. John Birch, in a word, belonged to that most heroic of all classes of human beings — the so-called common men and women who, in order to preserve our civilization, have fought, suffered, and died by the countless millions. Their bones lie interred at Normandy, in Treblinka, in the Soviet gulags, in the Cambodian killing fields, in the waters of the Florida Strait. Like John Birch, they all died in the hope that generations unborn would benefit from their sufferings and sacrifices, even if their names were lost to posterity. Captains and kings depart this fallen world lavished with acclaim, but we must suppose that the millions of common heroes like John Birch will, in some future, better time, receive the higher honor. ■