

*Our Mission: Researching, preserving and promoting the Legacy of Florida Baptists*

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*LEGACY, as the monthly newsletter of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, has as its mission to highlight the legacy forged by the people and events in Florida Baptist history. During 2024, the LEGACY's monthly issues will feature brief personal profiles of selected Florida Baptist men and women, who through their Christian commitment, have demonstrated Legacy Leadership in their ministry service on the Florida Baptist mission field. These persons, could join with the Apostle Paul, in declaring as "God's fellow workers" they have "laid a foundation" for God's kingdom on earth and upon which "someone else is building" [II Corinthians 3:9-10NIV].*

## **Florida Native Rufus Gray was the Only Southern Baptist Missionary Killed By the Japanese in WW II**

Florida native Rufus Gray (b. 1915; d. 1942), as a newly commissioned Southern Baptist missionary, died as the result of torture applied by Japanese military interrogators in early 1942. The tragic death of the 27-year-old Titusville native, placed Gray on the honor roll of Christian martyrs who died defending their faith and service to Jesus Christ.

Rufus Gray, born in Titusville, Florida, June 3, 1915, was one of five children born to Chattie Field and Coyle Binford Gray. When Rufus was one year old, the family moved to Fort Pierce, Florida.

"From early childhood Rufus was characterized by his business ability, his thrift, and his industry. . . . When about ten years of age, Rufus Gray began carrying papers, a job which he continued on through school, in addition to many others with drugstores, grocery stores, and other places. He always managed to get in at least a few minutes' tennis practice at night if too busy during the day. He became an expert tennis player and kept up the sport during his brief missionary years," Foreign (now International) Mission Board writer Ione Gray recounted in a January, 1955, *Commission* magazine article.



### **Responding to God's Call to Missions**

On February 3, 1925, after having made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, ten-year old Rufus was baptized at the First Baptist Church, Fort Pierce. **Subsequently, "During the summer of 1934 I attended the DeLand Baptist Assembly where I came face to face with the cross of Christ," Rufus Gray wrote on his application for foreign mission service.** "As I prayed about it, I knew that I was going to be a missionary. That night at the consecration service, I volunteered to go to the foreign field."

In pursuit of his God-inspired calling, Gray attended Furman University and completed the four-year bachelor of arts degree in

three years. He then attended and graduated from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky. While attending the seminary and serving as a part-time pastor of churches in Indiana, Gray was ordained in the First Baptist Church of Highland Park, Ky. in 1938.

### Marriage to University and Seminary Friend

Marian Peeler (b. 1915; d. 1967), was a native of South Carolina, but in her high school years lived in Tampa, Florida. Marian became friends with Rufus after the two met as freshmen at Furman University. **Responding to God's call to mission service, Miss Peeler also went to Louisville to attend the W.M.U. Training School, where she earned the master of religious education degree.** Upon graduation, the couple married May 10, 1939.



A physical description of the Grays was recorded in Fern Harrington Miles' book on the internment of missionaries. She wrote that "Rufus's ears stuck out slightly from his head. Of medium height, Rufus was thin and wiry, with dark blue piercing eyes, delicate features, and neatly combed dark brown hair, except for a few sprigs in his crown that stood straight up. Marian was short, stocky, and slightly bowlegged, with blonde hair and a round face with dimples in each cheek when she smiled—which was most of the time."

### Commissioned to Serve in China

The Grays applied for appointment for missionary service in the Far East. And during the 1940 meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, they were among a group of young adults appointed to foreign missions' service. Already two regional wars were escalating: one in Europe led by Adolph Hitler; and a second conflict was underway in China as the Japanese sought to expand the land of the "Rising Sun."



From California the couple sailed to Peiping, China, where they were to study the Chinese language in the College of Chinese Studies. Within a year, the war in China caused the missionary language students to leave China for Baguio, Philippines, a mountain resort 175 north of Manila, on the island of Luzon. They continued their language studies following the birth of the Grays first child – William Gilman – on September 8, 1941.

Three months later – December 7, 1941 – the Japanese executed a surprise air-bombing attack upon the U.S. Pacific Naval Fleet docked at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and the United States was unceremoniously drawn into World War II.

### Japanese Invaded Philippine Islands

Meanwhile, Japanese military aggression moved towards the Philippine Islands. **On December 29 the Japanese entered Baguio and arrested 175 missionary (among whom the Grays and six others were Southern Baptists) and 225 civilian personnel who were placed in a makeshift prisoner of war camp.** [A total of 88 Southern Baptist missionaries were detained by the Japanese during World War II and all but one (Gray) was eventually released.]

The Baguio detainees were separated into four groups – men, women with children under age three, children over age three, and the sick and adults over age sixty – and initially none were permitted any contact with the other groups. December 29<sup>th</sup> became the last day Marian and baby Billy ever saw their husband and father Rufus Gray.

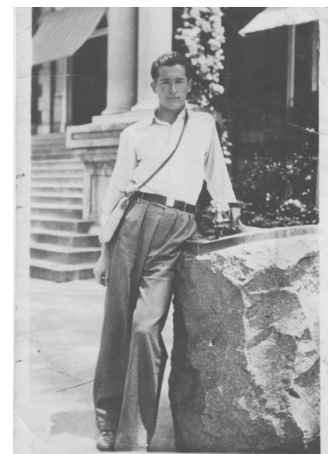
In mid-January, 1942, the Japanese Military Police began interviewing all missionary personnel. The personnel – selected by alphabetical order – were taken in groups to the local police station to be interrogated.

**Based upon reports later filed with the U.S. Government and accounts by eyewitnesses, the Japanese suspected the School of Chinese Studies was being used to recruit spies for use in Japanese-occupied China. Additionally, the Japanese falsely believed certain missionary personnel were spies of the United States.**

It was a sunny Sunday morning, January 25, when the next group of missionaries were summoned for questioning. Within that group was Rufus Gray and Lutheran missionary Carroll Hinderlie, Fern Harrington Miles later wrote in recalling those days of Japanese occupation.

### Gray's Photographs Became Incriminating Evidence

Rufus Gray apparently had been targeted for special interrogation because of what were innocent, but incriminating, photographs that he made. **An avid hobbyist-photographer, Gray had taken hundreds of pictures in China and the Philippines. In the early days of the Japanese occupation the Grays' home was searched and ransacked which resulted in all of Grays' photographs being strewn about.** Sometime later, while collecting the photographs, Marian discovered only three pictures were missing. It was later speculated that the Chinese in the missing pictures may have been leaders in the anti-Japanese organization in Baguio. The Japanese had probably seized the pictures as bogus evidence that Gray was an undercover agent for the United States.



Missionaries and Chinese civilians who were interviewed were subjected to a variety of harsh interrogation methods. These ranged from physical beatings by fists and whips to a torture method called the “water cure,” a polite way of saying waterboarding.

### Waterboarding Used to Extract Confessions

To extort confessions by means of the “water cure,” the victim was tied to a low table on his back with his head over a bathtub. **A Japanese soldier held the victim's nose while another poured water from a teakettle into the prisoner's mouth.** Forced to breathe through his mouth, the victim had to swallow the water or drown. When his stomach was about to burst from excess fluid, the soldiers jumped on the victim's stomach or pounded it to make the pain unbearable. Often the prisoner became nauseated and vomited up the fluid. If no confession was forthcoming, the “water cure” was re-applied.

Hinderlie, Rolland Flory and Herbert Loggins who were close friends with Rufus, and who underwent similar treatment during interrogation by the Japanese, believe Gray's death occurred while being subjected to the "water cure." **"That is, while he had the water cure the guards jumped on him under some kind of provocation, perhaps being hit by him, and his intestines burst and so he perished as far as the physical life was concerned," Hinderlie later recalled in a letter to writer Ione Gray.**

Hinderlie further reported that while waiting to be interrogated in an adjoining room, he heard what he thought to be manual resuscitation being administered on Gray. "My own opinion is that they did not expect Rufus to die," he wrote in 1953.

### **Rufus Gray Died for His Christian Witness**

"I was abused, not for my American citizenship but because I was a Christian and for my Christian faith. It was for this also that Rufus died. I think we should not obscure that fact . . . I am sure he gave a full confession for his faith," Hinderlie concluded. Several fellow missionaries who were in rooms near where Gray was being interrogated reported to have heard Gray's final words calling out to God.

Gray's Bible was later returned by the Japanese military to Marian in which two specific highlighted passages were dated Jan. 6, 1942: Psalms 18:2 and 17. **Verse two reads: "The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower."**

Meanwhile, Marian Gray and son Billy continued to be held in various Japanese-run prisoner camps until July, 1945, when U.S. military forces led by General Douglas MacArthur liberated the Philippines. Marian Gray and son Billy returned to the United States. Marian diligently researched American and Japanese government records, although unsuccessfully, to secure information on Rufus' death and burial location.

**Subsequently, Marian married (1945) Charles P. Cowherd (b. 1912; d. 1975) who had served as an Army chaplain during the war. The couple applied for and were appointed as Southern Baptist missionaries where they served in China, Indonesia, Hong Kong and Taiwan for the next 20-years.**

[**RESOURCES:** Ione Gray, *The Commission*, January, 1955; Fern Harrington Miles, *Captive Community* (1987); Carroll Hinderlie letter to Ione Gray, dated December 16, 1953; basic biographical information sourced from [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com); *Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, 2016; additional resources maintained in the Rufus and Marian Gray Collection held by the Florida Baptist Historical Society.]