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John Chau Aced Missionary Boot Camp. Reality Proved a Harsher Test.

By Jeffrey Gettleman, Kai Schultz, Ayesha Venkataraman and Hari Kumar

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Just months before undertaking the most forbidding journey in his life as a young missionary to a remote Indian Ocean island, John Allen Chau was blindfolded and dropped off on a dirt road in a remote part of Kansas.

After a long walk, he found a mock village in the woods inhabited by missionaries dressed in odd thrift-store clothes, pretending not to understand a word he said. His role was to preach the gospel. The others were supposed to be physically aggressive. Some came at him with fake spears, speaking gibberish.

It was part of an intensive and somewhat secretive three-week missionary training camp. Mary Ho, the international executive leader for All Nations, the organization that ran the training, said, “John was one of the best participants in this experience that we have ever had.”

For Mr. Chau, 26, the boot camp was the culmination of years of meticulous planning that involved linguistics training and studying to become an emergency medical technician, as well as forgoing full-time jobs so he could travel and toughen himself up.

He did it all with the single-minded goal of breaking through to the people of North Sentinel Island, a remote outpost of hunters and gatherers in the Andaman Sea who had shown tremendous hostility to outsiders.

It was an obsession. Ever since Mr. Chau had learned in high school through a missionary website, the Joshua Project, that the North Sentinel people were perhaps the most isolated in the world, he was hooked. Much of what he did the rest of his short life was directed toward this mission.



Mr. Chau in an undated photo.
via Reuters

He would pull up Google Maps and point to a green speck in a place no one had ever heard of — the Andaman Islands, far off the coast of India — and tell his friends with a buoyant smile: “I’m going there.”

In the 21st century, it is a marvel that a place like North Sentinel even exists.

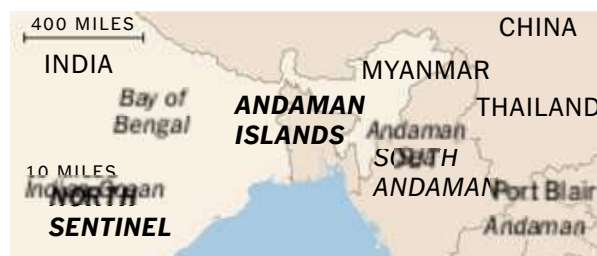
A tropical island, it is home to a few dozen people living a lifestyle thousands of years old and speaking a language no outsiders understand. Visitors have been driven back and killed by islanders armed with bows and arrows. Mr. Chau knew this.

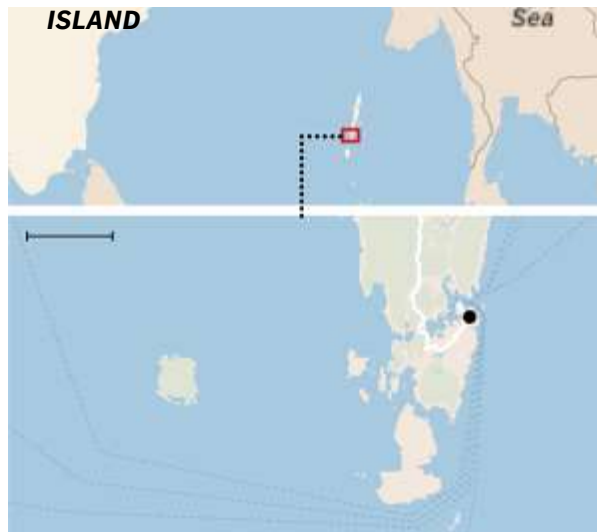
A review of hundreds of pages of his journals and blog postings, as well as interviews with two dozen people from around the world — fellow missionaries, family members and relatives of fishermen in the Andaman Islands — reveal a portrait of a joyful adventurer with a zest for life who resisted all warnings, despite being told repeatedly he might be killed.

“My folks tried to talk him out of it,” said John Ramsey, a friend. “He said it was what he felt called to do, and he was pretty made up in his mind already so it didn’t seem like persuasion would do a lot of good anyway.”

As he prepared for the mission, Mr. Chau stepped up his exercise routine, doing push-ups, jogging and being careful what he ate.

Friends said he did not expect to die and had taken all precautions he could think of to survive, including packing what he called an “initial contact response kit” with dental forceps to remove arrows.





By The New York Times

Many of his friends admitted they knew the mission was extremely dangerous — and illegal because for years the Indian government has prohibited outsiders from visiting the island.

But they also said they were in awe of what he was trying to do, seeing Mr. Chau as a pure expression of their faith.

His mission failed. After landing on North Sentinel in mid-November wearing only black underpants — Mr. Chau thought that would make the islanders feel more comfortable — he struggled to communicate.

The islanders were aggressive, as they have been with just about everyone else who had tried to make contact with them.

They shouted at him. They shot arrows. Then they killed him.

His body is still on the beach. Indian police officers are afraid to retrieve it, lest they increase the hostilities.

His friends mourn the loss of someone they describe as a real character: good looking but perennially single, always exploring, even landing a beef jerky sponsorship that gave him all the free jerky he could eat for his travels.



A photo from Mr. Chau's Instagram feed showing a family vacation to Yellowstone in 2003.

But many fellow Christians, including some of his friends, are uncomfortable with what he did.

“He was caught up in a dangerous set of ideologies that helped drive him to do something so unwise,” said Kaleb Graves, a student pastor in Arkansas who befriended Mr. Chau at a linguistics institute last year.

“He should have known better.”

Missionary Work: A Perfect Fit

Mr. Chau grew up in Vancouver in Washington State, not far from Portland, Ore. The youngest of three children, he is the son of an American mother, who is a lawyer, and a Chinese father, a psychiatrist.

He is of the generation that has put his entire life — even before it actually started — online, including pictures of his young father during Mao's Cultural Revolution. His father, Patrick, said he disagreed with his son about many religious matters and did not want him going to North Sentinel but was “in the dark most of the time” about what his son was doing.

Mr. Chau attended a Christian high school and then Oral Roberts University, a fundamentalist Christian school, where people remembered how positive and open he was.

“Having a conversation with John was like having a conversation with someone who reached out their hand and put it on your heart to feel the way it beats,” said Nicole Hopkins, a college friend.

“When he looked at me, it was like someone really saw me,” she said, “like I could take off any mask of who I pretended to be.”



Nicole Hopkins, Mr. Chau and Christian Vaughn during their college years. via Nicole Hopkins

His heroes were the naturalist John Muir and Jim Elliot, an American evangelical missionary killed in Ecuador, and friends said missionary work was the perfect fit.

It united his two interests: traveling to far-flung places and serving God.

‘Well Aware of the Dangers’

In the Book of Matthew, the resurrected Jesus says: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

This passage is known as the Great Commission, and several of Mr. Chau’s friends said that more than anything else, it explained why Mr. Chau did what he did.

In the past few decades, mission work has soared. The number of American Christian missionaries going overseas has increased to around 130,000 today, from 57,000 in

1970, said Gina A. Zurlo, associate director at the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

The reasons, scholars say, are the rise of evangelicalism; an increase in the number of independent churches organizing their own missions; and the ease of travel.

After college, Mr. Chau hit the road. He took temporary jobs — soccer coach, wilderness guide, AmeriCorps — so he could hike, mountain climb, kayak and scuba dive, blogging all the way.



Room 121 at Lalaji Hotel where Mr. Chau stayed on visits to Port Blair. Saumya Khandelwal for The New York Times

He also learned first aid and became an E.M.T.

In 2015, he made his first of four trips to the Andaman Island chain, basing himself in Port Blair, the main city.

The men at the hotel where he usually stayed said he was friendly and always requested the same room: 121, a small single with a good view.

Preparations for his trip to North Sentinel picked up last year. He completed a summer course at the Canada Institute of Linguistics, in British Columbia, where he hunkered down in a dorm room stacked with books and jars of peanut butter, immersing himself in phonology and phonetics.

He was determined to translate the Bible into the language that the people on North Sentinel speak, which has stumped anthropologists who say it is unintelligible even to people who live on nearby islands.

He told his friends that he wanted to immerse himself in the culture and stay for years.

He also reassured them he would take it slow, leaving gifts for the islanders and waiting for them to open up to him before he approached.

While he was preparing for his mission, Mr. Chau struck up a relationship with Perky Jerky, a company that gives away its product to “micro influencers.” In exchange for free jerky, Mr. Chau agreed to promote Perky Jerky on social media.



Mr. Chau pointing at a globe with John Ramsey and Mr. Ramsey's brother, Jeremiah. via John Ramsey

He often had the boxes of Perky Jerky sent to his friend, Mr. Ramsey, whose family lived about an hour away from the linguistics school. He and Mr. Ramsey had met during a summer trip to Israel for Christian students.

While Mr. Chau did not broadcast his North Sentinel plans on social media, he revealed them to the Ramsey family.

“He was well aware of the dangers and the fact that it was not exactly legal,” Mr. Ramsey said.

Mr. Ramsey's mother, who initially had misgivings, was won over and helped edit Mr. Chau's application for missionary boot camp.

An Isolated People

In a world where just about every mile is mapped, North Sentinel remains an enigma. The people there have resisted contact from outsiders for as long as there are records.

In 1880, a 19-year-old British naval officer impetuously kidnapped several islanders and brought them back to Port Blair. Some soon died and later the officer wondered if this episode had increased the islanders' hostility.

Around this time, the British, who were the imperial power in the region, began building up Port Blair, home to a large prison.



North Sentinel Island. Gautam Singh/Associated Press

Vishvajit Pandya, an Indian anthropologist, said the people on North Sentinel used to trade with other islanders and possibly intermarry with them, but the British expansion disrupted those ties, isolating North Sentinel.

The population of the island has now fallen to 50 to 100, which anthropologists say could be a threat to survival.

From what anthropologists surmise, the islanders are related to other Andaman ethnic

groups. All are believed to have migrated from Africa tens of thousands of years ago.

The people on North Sentinel eat fish and turtles, wear bark belts around their waists and carry long bows to fire arrows. **They have killed several outsiders, including fishermen, who have stepped on their beach.**

Nevertheless, Mr. Chau was determined to go there alone.

He thought his size would make him less threatening, Mr. Ramsey said. Mr. Chau was about 5'6," 130 pounds.

In October 2017, Mr. Chau began his missionary training at All Nations' headquarters in Kansas City, Mo. He attended lectures, spoke with anthropologists and participated in the village simulation exercise.



A photo Mr. Chau posted on Instagram on Oct. 21, five days after landing on Port Blair for the last time.

That exercise, said Mrs. Ho of All Nations, was “designed to reflect an amalgamation of many different aspects of language and culture that a missionary might encounter on the field.”

Mr. Chau performed impressively, she said. Still, there were concerns.

His planned trip to North Sentinel had no precedent. And missionaries usually travel in teams. **Others were willing to go with him, Mrs. Ho said, but he refused, saying it**

was too dangerous.

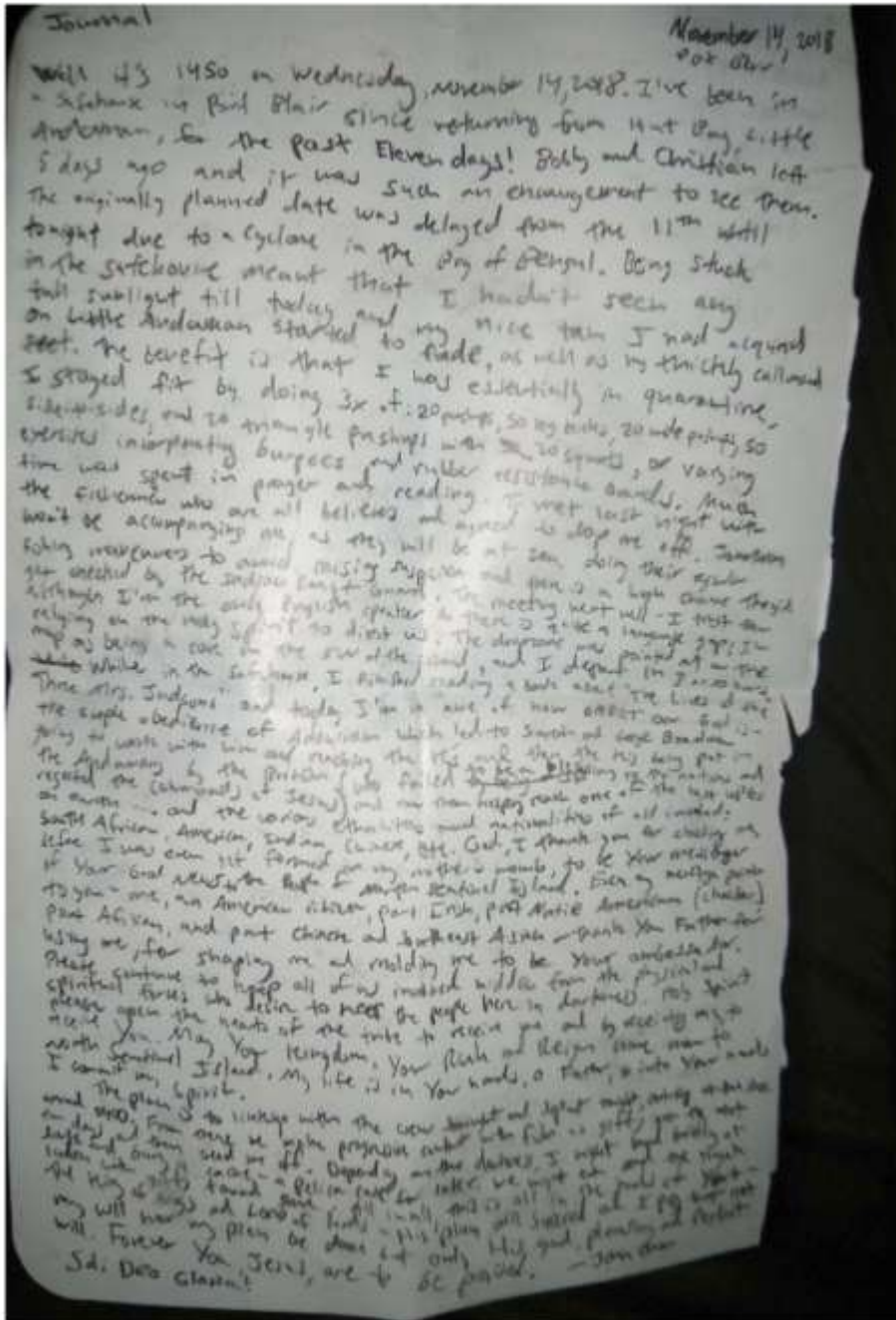
Making Contact

Mr. Chau landed in Port Blair on Oct. 16, traveled to another island in the Andamans and then returned to Port Blair.

There, he holed up for 11 days in a small apartment that he referred to as a “safe house” in a long note that the police found after his death. He wrote that he never saw sunlight that whole time.

John Chau’s Writing

All Nations, the missionary organization where John Chau trained, shared images from a note written in his final days.



Scanned by CamScanner

13 pages, 3.63 MB

The police say he was doing this to avoid being spotted; his friends say he was trying to prevent himself from getting sick to protect the islanders, whose immune systems have been isolated so long that some experts say they could be wiped out by the common cold.

With the help of a local evangelical, Mr. Chau hired five fishermen. Their boat was a battered wooden craft about 30 feet long, with a roof made of bamboo sticks and a plastic tarp. They chugged out the night of Nov. 14.



A fisherman on Wednesday pulling the boat that Mr. Chau used to reach North Sentinel Island. Saumya Khandelwal for The New York Times

When they reached North Sentinel in the morning, Mr. Chau assembled a collapsible kayak because the fishermen refused to go to the island with him, insisting on staying a half mile out.

Mr. Chau saw some islanders on the beach, paddled up to them and tried to preach, saying: “My name is John, I love you and Jesus loves you,” according to the note. They raised their bows and he paddled back to the fishing boat.

A few hours later, he tried walking onto the beach with some gifts like scissors and safety pins.

A boy shot an arrow into a waterproof Bible he was carrying.

Another islander, a man wearing a crown possibly made of flowers, stood on a coral rock and yelled at him.

Mr. Pandya, one of the few anthropologists to have set foot on North Sentinel, said these were clear warnings.

The islanders, he said, were saying: “I don’t want to engage with you, go away.”

“If they were so savage,” Mr. Pandya said, “they would have slaughtered him straight away.”



A rooftop in Port Blair. Saumya Khandelwal for The New York Times

The islanders chased Mr. Chau into the surf. He saw the fishermen far away, standing in the boat, waving their arms up and down, and swam to them.

The last part of the note conveys fear. He wrote, “It almost seems like certain death to stay here.”

But the next morning he insisted on sending the fishing boat away, saying in the letter he had met someone in South Africa who went through a similar experience on a different island in the Andamans and won the trust of islanders only after being dropped off by a boat.

He seemed now to be contemplating the end, writing in the note, “Remember, the first one to heaven wins.”

The fishermen told the police the next morning that Mr. Chau swam to the island. They then went to the ocean to fish.

When they returned to North Sentinel a day later to check on him, they saw a group of islanders on the beach dragging Mr. Chau’s body with a rope.

All five fishermen have been arrested, along with two others, accused of helping lead Mr. Chau to his death.

“I am frustrated hearing John’s name,” said Naw Halen, the wife of one of the fishermen. “He has filled my family with sorrow for our whole life.”

In American missionary circles, his death hit like a shock wave.

“I don’t question his motivation, I question his methods,” said Richard Albert Mohler Jr., the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Members of the Ramsey family gathered in their living room, read through Mr. Chau’s last letter and cried.

But they said they did not feel guilty.

“I don’t,” Mr. Ramsey said. “He had a higher calling that he was following. I don’t have any regrets.”