

Don and Teri Caswell describe how terrorist changed their lives

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CHARLESTON, S.C. (ABP) – The phone call came as Teri Caswell was having breakfast with her son Caleb on the last Monday morning of 2002. It was Oksana, a Russian pharmacist who worked with her husband.

“Teri, did you know that Don’s been hurt?”

Don was a pharmacist at Jibla Baptist Hospital in Yemen, where he and Teri were on a two-year assignment with the International Mission Board. Don wasn’t scheduled to work that day but had gone in to make up for taking a day off. And now he was hurt.

Teri pleaded for details, but Oksana would say only that “a crazy man” had hurt Don.

What she would not say was that the lone gunman had shot Don at point-blank range.

What she would not say is that the gunman also had fired with deadly accuracy at administrator Bill Koehn, physician Martha Myers and supply manager Kathy Gariety, bringing their early-morning staff meeting to a fatal conclusion.

Don and Teri Caswell recounted their experience to members of the Association of State Baptist Papers, meeting in Charleston, S.C., on Feb. 6.

As Don Caswell was rushed to the operating room, his co-workers were unaware the three Americans had been killed. Surgeon Judy Williams, who was preparing to operate on Don, sent an aide to tell “Mr. Bill” Koehn about the shooting. The aide returned to say “Mr. Bill’s been shot.”

And then: “Dr. Martha has been shot.” And finally: “Kathy has been shot.”

Don tried to absorb each new revelation as he lay on the operating table. The reality finally registered “when they rolled Dr. Martha into the operating room, near my feet, and I could tell she had already gone to be with the Lord,” Don said. He wondered if he would die, too.

A male Yemeni nurse wept as he prepped Don for surgery, his tears raining onto Don’s wounded stomach. Don prayed that Teri would arrive at the hospital before he went under anesthesia.

Teri, meanwhile, was frantically calling the offices of the workers who now lay dead, hoping to learn more what happened to her husband. Instead she woke her older son to watch Caleb, then jumped into the car for a frightening four-mile dash to the hospital.

Soldiers already were barring the hospital gate. But Teri knew just enough Arabic to convince them that her husband was inside, and they let her through. A hospital administrator took her to the operating room, where she was reunited with her husband just before his surgery began. Despite his injuries, Don was trying to keep the surgeons’ spirits up: “Remember, I’m allergic to bullets,” he warned them.

Teri was comforted to know Don was in good hands. But when she looked into an adjacent room and saw the draped bodies of his three dead colleagues, the gravity of the situation hit her. “I knew at that moment it was not a bad dream. It was really happening.”

In those moments, as she struggled with rising bitterness, she remembered a lesson learned a day earlier.

Kathy Gariety and Martha Myers had taught Caleb’s Sunday school class just the day before. The five-year-old had been involved in an altercation with a local boy earlier in the week, Teri recalled, and, having gotten “the short end of

the stick," Martha Myers had bandaged the cut on Caleb's head. Later, in Sunday school, his hospital caregivers became his teachers.

They taught Caleb, the only child in class that day, about forgiveness, Teri recalled. Kathy Gariety and Martha Myers wanted Caleb to learn that, even when other people are different or do something mean, Christians should love and forgive them.

Looking at the bodies of the two American women, who had loved the Yemenis with all their hearts, who had remained in Yemen despite the risk, who had taught her son about forgiveness, Teri prayed: "Lord, don't let a root of bitterness grow toward these people."

"God gave me a supernatural ability to forgive," she said.

Teri said she remembered that the Apostle Paul was traveling to Damascus to kill Christians when Christ revealed himself in a blinding light. Thinking of the Islamic gunman now in custody, boasting that his deed had earned him a martyr's place in heaven, she prayed that God might shine a light on him as well, and that the man might come to know Christ.

The Caswells spent that night in Jibla. The next morning, an ambulance transported them to Sana'a, Yemen's capital. They stayed overnight and attended a memorial service for their slain colleagues before being flown to a hotel in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates. Trained counselors helped them begin to heal spiritually and emotionally.

Two-and-a-half weeks later, the Caswells were back in Jibla. They walked through the hospital and saw where the others died. They examined the room where Don was wounded. Don remembers the sense of peace he had felt when he realized he was about to be shot. He wondered if it would hurt, if he would die.

He felt the first bullet, and it really did hurt, he said. He heard the next two shots, one of which struck him in the side. He landed face down on the floor, anticipating a killing blow that didn't come. The gunman walked out of the room, pointed and clicked the empty gun at two other hospital personnel. Then he laid the 9-millimeter revolver – not a rifle as originally reported – on the floor and surrendered.

Meanwhile, Don began to pray in earnest. "I asked God if he was going to take me now. I said, 'That's OK if it's what you want, but I really don't want to leave Teri and the boys yet.'"

He didn't have to. Neither bullet entered the abdominal cavity. One passed through Don's left side. The other remained lodged deep in the muscle tissue above his right thigh.

Don is convinced that God was at work, saving his life from a man who did not miss in killing his three previous victims. Both he and Teri believe God saved them for a purpose. But they also know there is a corollary to their belief that God actively spared Don's life, for it implies God's equally conscious choice not to save the veteran missionaries who died just down the hall. The Caswells accept that.

"Even if a gunman takes their lives, it is God calling them home," Teri says. "He's going to use their deaths in a special way to do his work in Yemen."

Don and Teri Caswell recently returned to America and will live for the time being in Texas. They don't yet know what task lies ahead for them, but they say wherever God leads, they'll go – even if it is back to Jibla.

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Yemen hospital reopens after attack with new leaders, more security

By Greg Warner

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JIBLA, Yemen (ABP) – A former Christian hospital in Yemen, site of a terrorist attack that killed three American mission workers Dec. 30, reopened Feb. 1 under a new name, new leadership and heightened security.

The facility, formerly Jibla Baptist Hospital, is now owned and operated by the Muslim-led Yemeni government. The Southern Baptist International Mission Board followed through with a long-planned transfer of the hospital to Yemen's ministry of health Dec. 31.

The hospital, once the most prominent Christian ministry in Yemen, had been closed since the Dec. 30 shooting, in which a Muslim extremist entered the 35-year-old hospital in Jibla with a concealed pistol and killed a doctor and two administrators – all longtime IMB employees.

The hospital is now known simply as "Jibla Hospital" on signage and documents – the word "Baptist" was erased from the hospital sign even before the shooting. But local media are calling the facility "the hospital of peace," a name the remaining IMB workers hope becomes permanent.

One of those IMB workers, assistant administrator Lee Hixon, said he "was not very hopeful," even before the shootings, that the facility would ever open again. "God moved to reopen this hospital," he said.

Although now operated by the Yemeni government, the hospital is managed by two of its own longtime employees. Administrator Abdel Karim Hassen and Nursing Director Abdel Karim Ali – both Yemenis – each have 20-plus years experience with the hospital's former owners. Most other hospital staffers are Yemenis.

The hospital's clinic, operating room and emergency room have reopened, said Hixon, one of the handful of IMB mission workers who remain at the hospital. He talked to reporters by telephone Feb. 7.

Only 14 of the hospital's previous 45 beds are open, however. And the labor and delivery facility – the special interest of slain obstetrician Martha Myers – remains closed for lack of a doctor. Only one American doctor remains – Judy Williams – who works both in the clinic and the operating room. The hospital sees about 40 patients a day, down from 130. About half of the hospital's 220-member staff left before the terrorist attack, and another 50-60 have left since, Hixon said.

The Yemeni administration would welcome more American doctors, including Christians from the IMB and other organizations, Hixon said. And, despite earlier signals to the contrary, the IMB said it is willing to appoint and support mission workers for the hospital, according to Larry Cox, IMB vice president for mobilization.

By all accounts, Christians and Muslims work peacefully side-by-side at the hospital. The hospital now is closed Friday and Sunday, the respective Muslim and Christian days of worship. The staff is allowed to meet every morning for prayer, Hixon said. And, for the first time, a Yemeni family is living in one of the 20 dwellings in the hospital compound.

Twelve IMB-related Americans – workers and family members – remain in Jibla. The biggest challenge they face, Hixon said, is heightened security. "Since Dec. 30, we have been under incredible security restrictions," he said. "That's a concern of ours."

The restrictions are understandable and affect all Westerners, Hixon noted. They also restrict IMB activities elsewhere in Yemen.

"It's a new normal," Hixon said. But he added, "There's a reinforced love for the people here. I'm excited to see what the Father will do. ... The group [of Americans] that are here in Jibla are special. There is ... a wonderful oneness that comes from who we are in the One."