



Martyrs of the Movement II


While the intended course of the movement to affirm the right to vote for African Americans in Alabama was non-violent, the movement to affect change was violently opposed throughout the Civil Rights period. The violence experienced by civil rights leaders and participants took many forms, from psychological intimidation to murder. Few of the perpetrators were ever brought to justice.

There were many victims of this violence throughout Alabama and the South, but over the years, memorials and commemorations have focused on a representative few. Among them were a group of active participants in a series of initiatives ranging from Marion to Montgomery, Alabama between February and August of 1965. Each of these martyrs of the central Alabama freedom movement was associated with a specific event or phase in the achievement of full voting rights for all citizens.

Viola Liuzzo, March 25, 1965

The long anticipated march on Montgomery began at Selma on Sunday, March 21, 1965. Plans had been completed and resources augmented to accommodate the hundreds of participants who would struggle over the 54-mile route along U.S. Highway 80.

At the conclusion of the five-day march, the participant heard an address given by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the steps of the Alabama State Capitol on March 25. Following the rally, throngs of marchers crowded the area of the capitol awaiting transportation back to Selma and elsewhere by volunteer drivers. Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, a Detroit housewife and mother of five, had been an



active participant in the march and was engaged in transporting Selma-based marchers in her automobile. Returning to Montgomery accompanied by a young African-American marcher, Leroy Moton, her car was assaulted by gunfire from a passing motorist. By the end of the week, on March 26, four perpetrators were in custody, one of whom was an informant. As a result of testimony from the F.B.I. informant, the three perpetrators were sentenced in December 1965 to a term of ten years in federal prison, after previously being acquitted in a state murder trial.

On August 6, 1965, less than five months after the Selma to Montgomery march, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the monumental Voting rights Act at the nation's capitol. Many people attribute her killing with the reason for the prompt passage of the Voting Rights act of 1965. Even with this monumental event, the struggle for equal rights in central Alabama continued.

Jonathan "Jon" M. Daniels, August 20, 1965

In Hayneville, Lowndes County, Alabama, the Lowndes County Freedom Organization was one of the many organizations attempting to register and organize African-American voters and field African-American candidates for elective office. Volunteers from across the country remained in the county in assistance of these efforts. Among the volunteers was a young Harvard University Episcopal seminarian, Jonathan M. Daniels. Later, as a result of his voter registration activities, Daniels was incarcerated in the Lowndes County jail for one week, where he was remembered for his morale-building support of his fellow activists. After his release, Daniels, along with three other activists, prepared to enter a town store when a local highway worker and part-time deputy sheriff, Tom Coleman, brandishing a shotgun ordered the group to leave. When Coleman pointed the shotgun in the direction of a young African-American woman in the group, Ruby Sales, Daniels jumped in front of the woman just as he fired his weapon. Daniels was killed instantly while a minister with the group was wounded. The shooter was acquitted of murder by an all-white jury six weeks later.