

**MY FRIEND THE FREEDOM RIDER:
Confronting Christian Terrorists in America's South**

By Nick Gier

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What was it that made the hate of whites for blacks so steady,
seemingly so woven into the texture of things?

—Richard Wright, *Black Boy*

As an African American woman born in Mississippi in 1954,
I owe a deep debt of gratitude to the Freedom Riders.
I know my life would be different were it not for them.

—Oprah Winfrey

I've waited 80 years for you to come.

—son of a Mississippi slave welcomes Freedom Riders



Ed Kale booked at the Jackson, Miss. Jail and Conferring with Idaho Sen. Frank Church

Oprah Winfrey's May 4th show celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Freedom Riders, who challenged southern political leaders to obey federal desegregation laws. My good friend Ed Kale, a native of Grangeville, was one of 178 Freedom Riders honored by Oprah and her audience.

In 1961 Ed, 24-years-old, was a student at Yale Divinity School, where one of his professors paid for his expenses to join the Freedom Riders. Two organizations sponsored them: the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Ed first traveled to Atlanta where SNCC trained him in non-violent techniques so he could deal with thugs and police dogs.

In 1947 CORE had organized the historic Journey of Reconciliation, a team of 8 whites and 8 blacks who undertook a two-week tour of southern cities. They were arrested for trying to enforce the 1942 Supreme Court decision banning segregation on interstate buses. Teaching “you Jews from New York” a lesson, Judge Henry Whitfield sentenced the whites to 90 days in jail while the blacks got only 30 days.

Starting from Washington, D. C. on May 4th, 1961, the first 13 “Riders,” as they were called by local blacks, split up between one Trailways and one Greyhound headed for Virginia. The blacks sat up front in white seats and the whites sat in the back of the buses. At a stop in Atlanta Martin Luther King, Jr. begged them not to proceed on their dangerous journey. The NAACP’s Roy Wilkins warned that the plan was “a desperately brave, reckless strategy.”

As the 13 Riders crossed the Alabama state line, about 200 Klansmen, organized by Alabama Police Commissioner Bull Connor, were waiting for them in their Sunday best. Among other slurs and insults they shouted “We’re going to kill the ni***rs and we are going to burn them alive.” The first bus was set on fire, and as the passengers fled in terror the blacks were indiscriminately beaten. When the second bus arrived Klansmen rushed on board and attacked all the blacks as well as the white Freedom Riders who came to their rescue.

One of those beaten was John Lewis—then a 21-year-old student from American Baptist College and now a congressman from Georgia. The man who attacked him was former Klansman Elwin Wilson, who was sitting next to Lewis on Oprah’s show. Wilson apologized for the beating—the only apology that Lewis ever received for the many blows he took as a civil rights leader. Lewis’ words still ring in Wilson’s mind: “We’re not here to cause trouble; we’re here for people to love each other.” Lewis did not fight back and refused to press charges against Wilson.

The first Freedom Riders were forced to quit because no transport companies (private or public) would take them any farther. The second wave of Riders was not, however, deterred. In Nashville Diane Nash, a 23-year-old SNCC member, declared that “after so much violence had been inflicted, the message would have been that all you have to do to stop a nonviolent campaign is inflict massive violence.” Saying that they were “the fresh troops,” Nash and 20 other students from Nashville colleges started planning another Freedom Ride.

Not only did the Riders fail to get support from King or NAACP, they also did not receive any assurances from the Kennedy administration. Although he admired the Riders for their courage, President Kennedy agreed with King that their actions were too provocative. Their timing was also really poor: the Bay of Pigs fiasco had just happened and the Berlin Wall was going up, so the Riders were an embarrassing distraction from some very tense international events. The rebuttal from many at the time was that the denial of African American rights did not give much credibility to Kennedy’s support for decolonization in Africa and the liberation of other people throughout the world.

John Seigenthaler, Attorney General Robert Kennedy’s assistant, tried to persuade Nash and her group to turn back, but they were determined to go. On May 21 Seigenthaler met them in Montgomery where the group was attacked by the Klan at the bus station. Seigenthaler was knocked unconscious and woke up 30 minutes later under a car. The Riders sought refuge in the First Baptist Church, made famous by its pastor Ralph Abernathy during the bus boycott of

1955-56. Inside the church were 1,500 supporters, but outside over 3,000 whites shouted racial epithets and threw bricks through the windows.

Fearing yet another conflagration (five Montgomery churches had been bombed in 1957), the Rev. King, who had now joined the activists, telephoned Robert Kennedy and asked for federal intervention. Kennedy said that he would act only if the Riders agreed to go home and have a “cooling off period.” Nash and her students refused, and CORE director James Farmer supported their decision with this famous statement: “We've been cooling off for 350 years. If we cool off anymore, we will be in a deep freeze. The Freedom Ride will go on.”

The Alabama National Guard was called in to form a human shield around the church and escort the Riders to Jackson, Mississippi. My friend Ed Kale and his colleagues arrived in Jackson on June 7th, and they were immediately arrested along with Nash's group from Montgomery. Ed wears his booking pictures (above), which he sent me recently, as a badge of honor.

After filling up all the jails and refusing bail, Ed and 300 other Freedom Riders were transferred to Mississippi's notorious Parchman Prison Farm. They were locked up in maximum security and issued only T-shirts and underwear. As punishment for singing all the time, the Riders' mattresses and sheets were taken away. The heat was turned up during the hot summer days and the air conditioning was on full blast at night. As a further “enhancement” the screens were removed and the Riders were attacked by flying insects attracted to the 24-hour lights. Ed was bailed out after 40 days so that he could be part of a delegation to Congress, but several others refused bail and stayed in prison for six months.

For 80 years the South had been under a reign of terror organized by people who were (except for a few) never convicted for the vicious assaults and murders they committed. They claimed to be protecting Christian civilization from race mixing and then from atheistic Communism. For the Klu Klux Klan civil rights activists were “agents of Satan determined to destroy Christian civilization.” FBI Director Jay Edgar Hoover was convinced it was a Communist conspiracy and that Martin Luther King was a Marxist-Leninist. In reality, as Elwin Wilson realized in John Lewis' loving gesture to him, they were Gandhian *satyagrahis*, nonviolent agents for the “force of truth.”

At the end of the summer some truth did win out. Segregated buses and restaurants with their “whites only” signs came down. In 1963 President Kennedy called for a new Civil Rights Bill, putting teeth in the one of 1875, which Southerners had ignored. The legislation was blocked by Southern senators until President Lyndon Johnson was able to pass the bill in 1964. The Freedom Riders, once declared as hopeless idealists or outside agitators, were slowly but surely transformed into national heroes.

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