

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

By Nick Gier

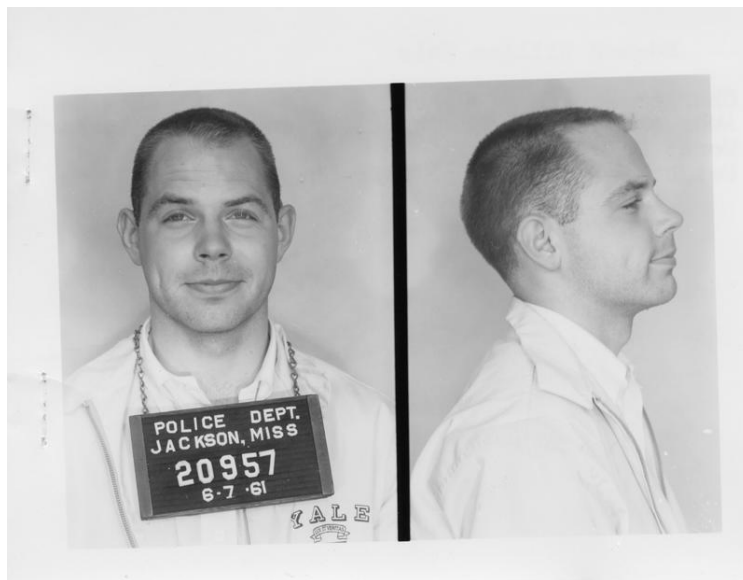
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As an African American woman born in Mississippi in 1954,  
I owe a deep debt of gratitude to the Freedom Riders.  
I know my life would be different were it not for them.

—Oprah Winfrey

I've waited 80 years for you to come.

—son of a Mississippi slave welcomes Freedom Riders



Oprah Winfrey's May 4<sup>th</sup> show celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> 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 Riders. The first group had already started out on May 4<sup>th</sup> from Washington, D.C. As the 13 Riders crossed the Alabama state line, their buses were attacked and one was burned. As the occupants fled in terror, they were beaten by a Klu Klux Klan mob organized by Bull Connor, Alabama's Police Commissioner.

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."

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, 23-year-old member of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, declared that they were "the fresh troops." On May 21 Nash and 20 other students were attacked by the Klan at the Montgomery bus station.

The Riders sought refuge in the First Baptist Church, where they met 1,500 supporters. 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), Martin Luther King, Jr., 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's group refused, and civil rights leader James Farmer supported the 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 7<sup>th</sup>, and they were immediately arrested along with Nash's group from Montgomery. Ed wears his booking pictures, 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 T-shirts and underwear. As punishment for singing all the time, the Riders' mattresses and sheets were taken away.

For 80 years the South had been under a reign of terror organized by people who were—except for a few exceptions—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 heroes.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years.