

A PROFILE IN COURAGE  
by The Reverend Albert R. Dreisbach, Jr.

(A Speech delivered in Atlanta, Georgia during Black History Week)

On March 7, 1965, I was in Rehobeth Beach, Delaware attending the annual diocesan convention when a phone call (from Fr. John Morris] informed me of "Bloody Sunday" on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. As ESCRU's (i.e. the Episcopal Society for Cultural & Racial Unity's) Associate Director, I was summoned to get to the National Airport in Washington, D.C. by any means possible as quickly as possible to board a charter flight for an ecumenical group of clergy and rabbis at 6:00 P.M. that evening to fly to that beleaguered city to support Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his Voter Registration Drive there.

I went to the local airport, hired a Piper Cub with a Cuban pilot and arrived with time to spare. The most memorable thing about that flight was the sheer amount of air traffic from Baltimore south - something of which I had never been aware while flying commercially. Just south of Baltimore, the radio crackled with "Boggie, Boggie, Boggie at three o'clock!" Immediately my Cuban pilot looked directly at nine o'clock." When I asked him "Why?" he responded: "You never worry about the ones they tell you about, it is the others that will kill you." Sure enough, at nine o'clock was a U.S. Navy Fighter heading back to Anacostia. I felt a great deal of relief when our wheels hit the ground at National.

There were about (150) clergy of all denominations waiting to board our charter flight to Montgomery, Alabama. Many were Episcopal priests - friends from the Civil Rights Movement.

The flight had been arranged by Fr. William Wendt of St. Stephens and the Incarnation thanks to a grant from a Mrs. Gumball, widow of a doctor who had planned to spend his retirement as a medical missionary in Africa, but who had died before ever accomplishing his dream. Her gift was in his memory.

We arrived in Montgomery and were met by a fleet of cars and ferried to Brown's A.M.E. Chapel in Selma. I will never forget the applause as we entered the church - most undeserved, but much appreciated. Many in the audience - including John Lewis, then a SNCC worker and now a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Georgia - wore bandages on their heads from the wounds received earlier that afternoon on Pettus Bridge. There were many rousing speeches by the Rev. James Bevel, Andrew Young, Dr. King and others and finally we were off to bed in local homes and a motel.

We had planned to march the next morning, but that was not to be. Governor George Wallace had issued an order forbidding any such march - a decision which actually proved to work in our favor. It gave us two weeks to get properly organized and allowed President Johnson to order in federal troops from Fort Bragg to protect us along the route of March. It also allowed us to gather needed supplies from Port-A-Johnnies to a large tent to shelter the marchers at night. The latter was supplied by the Episcopal Bishop of Arkansas who, as a boy, had saved a friend from drowning. That friend went on to become a manufacturer of tents, and when the bishop asked him for such a donation he immediately responded.

Throughout the week volunteers continued to pour in from all over the country. On any given day one could see the members of the Harvard faculty in Brooks Brothers suits - their Phi Beta Kappa keys flashing in the sun - raking up chicken bones and other fast food debris under the supervision of the church's sexton who knew more about garbage disposal than any of his more learned Ph.D.'s. The spirit of cooperation between race and class was a beautiful sight to behold.

I remember being particularly impressed by a little gray Volkswagen with Maine plates that pulled up one day. The face looked familiar, but I could not identify him immediately. He asked what he could do to help. A young SNCC worker, scornful of such an offer from a white Yankee liberal, said: "Yes, we need someone to dig holes for the Port-A-Johnnies and fill up the old ones each day." *The* man responded: "Where is the shovel?" For the entire march, this man dug new holes each day and filled in the old ones. At the end of the march, without ever drawing attention to himself, he got back in his little gray Volkswagen and returned to Maine. His name was Gary Merrill, the former husband of the actress Bette Davis.

On March 20th, the Saturday before the march, Bishop Kilmer Meyers of California celebrated the Holy Eucharist in front of Brown's A.M.E. Chapel. We avoided the local parish which reluctantly had admitted Blacks, but made sure that they were seated in the rear so that their lips would be the last to touch the chalice. Bishop Meyers announced that though the rite was that of the Episcopal Church, it was the Lord's Table and all who were baptized were welcome to receive. I will never forget one Roman Catholic layman, Jim Leatherer, an amputee who walked the entire distance on his crutches with blistered and bloody hands, who came forward to receive.

A few weeks later when we were cell mates in Chicago's Cook County Jail, I asked him. "What enabled you to come forward and receive given your church's teaching on the subject?" He responded: "Father, I'm not too bright. Every thing I learned about the church I learned from the sisters in parochial school. They always taught me that the Mass was the sacrament of unity. I sure didn't want to be separated in any way from those with whom I was going to march. I think that God and I understand; I hope that someday my church might understand also." I told Jim that I was going to nominate him as "Lay Theologian of the Year."

Finally, after two week's wait, the big day arrived. Though all of us would be allowed to march on that Sunday, after that the number was limited to three hundred in order to provide maximum security under these very hostile conditions. I arrived early at the assembly area and noticed a boy of about twelve – a bandage still on his head from "Bloody Sunday" – walking across the lot and headed directly for me. He had a moth-eaten blanket with a belt around it and a paper bag with his lunch. He approached and said: "Father, is anyone walking with you? My daddy's dead, my brother is a cripple and momma has to stay home with him. I am the 'onliest' one who can go, and I'm scared." I took his hand, put him on the inside and together we marched across Pettus Bridge. My eyes that day reverted to those of a Forward Observer, scanning the tree lines and very happy for the U.S. Army helicopter flying overhead. I was reminded of that chapter of my life when a reporter came up and asked: "Father, were you a Marine before you were a priest?" I answered "Yes" and he went on to ask: "What is the difference between then and now?" Off the top of my head I replied: "The beachhead is wider, the troops are not as well trained and my 'air cover' is not as close as it used to be."

I gripped the young man's hand more tightly and we continued the march. Never before nor since have I seen such courage in a twelve year old. He had already been beaten, he was scared, but in the words of the Movement he could still sing: "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me round, turn me round, turn me round. Ain't gonna let nobody turn me round. Keep on a walkin, keep on a talkin, marching on to freedom land."

I never saw him again after that first day. He made the whole march and I was only able to rejoin it on the night before we entered Montgomery on the last day. Before the Selma campaign was over, I was to lose a seminarian and member of our ESCRU staff who sacrificed his life to save that of a young female SNCC worker. His name was Jonathan Myrick Daniels and we commemorate his martyrdom on our Church Calendar every August the 14th.

Many in the Movement will forever remember the courage of Jonathan Daniels. I wonder if anyone else remembers a twelve year old boy with a bandage on his head who once said: "My daddy's dead, my brother is a cripple and momma has to stay home with him. I am the 'onliest' one who can go, and I'm scared." For me, he will always be "A Profile in Courage."

[The City of St. Jude)

Rejoining the march on a rainy afternoon prior to entering into Montgomery the next day, we reached the *City of St Jude* on its outskirts - a community founded by Roman Catholics during the mid-1930s which pioneered nondiscriminatory health, education, and social services when segregation was the norm in the Southeast.

I was slogging through a muddy area where a stage had been prepared when, a nun approached me and asked if I had an "assignment" for that evening. I replied "No" and asked what I could do to help. No one could have been more surprised or elated when she pointed to a small brick building about thirty yards from the stage which was to be the "green room" for such celebrities as Odetta, Harry Belafonte, Pete Seeger, Leonard Bernstein, and Joan Baez who had come to entertain the marchers at a "Stars of Freedom Rally" on that night before the final march to the Capitol. It was my job to see that these stars were not besieged by autograph seekers and others, to afford them some piece and quiet before performing and to open the door and start them on the way to the stage when the act preceding theirs was finished. With the exception of Odetta and Harry Belafonte whom I had met in New York while working as a seminarian field worker at the Church of the Master, I had never attended a concert by any of the others let alone had a chance to meet them "up close and personal." By this time Martin Luther King, Jr., and 2,000 participants of the Selma-to-Montgomery March found shelter in the City of St. Jude which offered its 36 acres to the marchers, who slept on the athletic field that night.

[The Entry into Montgomery]

The following day the sun came out and we made the final leg of the march into Montgomery. By this time many prominent people like Robert Kennedy and others had joined us for the day complete with photographers to record their presence. As we walked down the streets many residents were hanging out of their windows jeering and taunting us with obscenities like "Nigger lovers", "Communists". and "Yankee bastards". Ten yards in front of me was the Very Rev. Francis B. Sayre, then Dean of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. and son-in-law of President Woodrow Wilson. Impeccably dressed in a tailored overcoat, he yelled something back at one of the hecklers. Out of nowhere a young black marshal identified by his red armband approached the dean and politely informed him: "Sir, this is a nonviolent demonstration and that

includes verbal responses. If you cannot abide by the requirements of this march, I will have to ask you to step to the side and cease being a participant." There was no argument from the dean. Chagrined, he hung his head, buttoned his lip and remained mute until the march reached the steps of the capitol. Once again the "mighty" had been humbled.

[The Ride from Montgomery to Tuskegee)

Larry and Rose Schein, friends of mine from Wilmington, Delaware, had driven down to Montgomery for the final day of the "Great March." As Dr. King finished his speech on the steps of the capitol, I turned to them and said "Let's get out of here as quickly as possible." They laughed at me and said "You're 'paranoid' - you've been in the South too long." I responded that the regular Army troops will be pulling out and all hell is going to break loose. I won't feel safe until we are in the cafeteria at Tuskegee Institute - not far from the Georgia border." Still chuckling at my unwarranted "paranoia," we found their car and departed for Tuskegee. They ribbed me all the way to the cafeteria where we had a nice meal and once again got in the car for the last leg home to Atlanta. Larry immediately turned on the car radio to catch the national networks' coverage of the day's events only to hear: "We interrupt this program to bring you a special news bulletin: Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, wife of a Detroit teamster official, has been shot to death while ferrying civil rights workers back from Montgomery to Selma." If my friends were not "white" before that broadcast, they quickly became "bleached white as snow" upon hearing this report. After taking a few deep breaths, they turned to me and said: "We guess you were not 'paranoid' after all. How far have we got to go to get to the Georgia border?"