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Jackson, Jimmie Lee

Biography | | December 16, 1938 to February 26, 1965



On the night of 18 February 1965, an Alabama state trooper shot Jimmie Lee Jackson in the stomach as he tried to protect his mother from being beaten at Mack’s Café. Jackson, along with several other African Americans, had taken refuge there from troopers breaking up a night march protesting the arrest of James Orange, a field secretary for the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference** (SCLC) in Marion, Alabama. Jackson died from his wounds eight days later. Speaking at his funeral, Martin Luther King called Jackson “a martyred hero of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity” (King, 3 March 1965).

Jimmie Lee Jackson was born in Marion, Alabama, on 16 December 1938. At age 26, the former soldier was the youngest deacon in his church, the father of a young daughter, and worked as a laborer.

Throughout late 1963 and 1964, local black activists in Selma and nearby Marion campaigned for their right to vote. By the time King and the SCLC arrived in Selma on 2 January 1965 to support the campaign, Jackson had already attempted to register to vote several times. King chose to bring SCLC to the region because he was aware of the brutality of local law enforcement officials, led by the sheriff of Dallas County, James G. **Clark**. King thought that unprovoked and overwhelming violence by whites against nonviolent blacks would capture the attention of the nation and pressure Congress and President Lyndon **Johnson** to pass voting rights legislation.

On the night Jackson was shot, he marched with his sister, mother, 82-year-old grandfather, and other protesters from Zion United Methodist Church, where King’s colleague C. T. **Vivian** had just spoken, toward the city jail where Orange had been imprisoned earlier that day. When the local police, aided by state troopers, violently broke up the march, demonstrators ran back to the church, nearby houses, and businesses for safety. In the melee, Jackson and his family sought refuge with others in Mack’s Café. Troopers followed the protesters inside and began beating people. After Jackson was shot, troopers chased him outside and continued to beat him until he collapsed. In addition to Jackson, at least half a dozen others were hospitalized for the blows they received from troopers.

King visited Jackson at the Good Samaritan Hospital in Selma four days after he was shot. Jackson was conscious, and King recalled his words during the eulogy he delivered to the overflowing Zion Church: “I never will forget as I stood by his bedside a few days ago ... how radiantly he still responded, how he mentioned the freedom movement and how he talked about the faith that he still had in his God. Like every self-respecting Negro, Jimmie Jackson wanted to be free ... We must be concerned not merely about who murdered him but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderer” (King, 3 March 1965). Many were enraged that no case was opened against James Bonard Fowler, the Alabama state trooper who shot Jackson. Fowler acknowledged shooting Jackson at close range in an affidavit given the night of the shooting and told his story publicly in 2005 for an article in *Sojourners Magazine*. He claimed that Jackson attempted to take his pistol from him, and called the shooting self defense. Marion police chief T. O. Harris claimed that protesters had attacked law enforcement officers with rocks and bottles, but news reporters on the scene saw troopers beating protesters as they tried to escape, and black witnesses said no bottles were ever thrown. Forty years later, in May 2007, Fowler was indicted for Jackson’s murder.

In the weeks following Jackson’s death, SCLC organized a march from **Selma to Montgomery**, the state capitol. An SCLC brochure explained that Jackson’s death was “the catalyst that produced the march to Montgomery.” On 7 March 1965, the day the march first set off from Selma, Sheriff Jim Clark’s deputies attacked demonstrators with tear gas, batons, and whips. Images of the attack were nationally televised and at least one network interrupted regular programming to broadcast the violence of “Bloody Sunday.” Two white civil rights workers, Viola Liuzzo and Reverend James **Reeb**, were later killed during the campaign. In August, the **Voting Rights Act of 1965** was signed into law.

Footnotes

Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 1998.

John Fleming, “Former Trooper Arraigned in 1965 Murder Case,” *Anniston Star*, 11 July 2007.

John Fleming, “Who Killed Jimmy Lee Jackson?” *Sojourners Magazine* 34 (April 2005): 20–24.

Garrow, *Protest at Selma*, 1978.

King, Eulogy for Jimmie Lee Jackson, 3 March 1965, **MMFR**.

SCLC, *Let There Be Understanding of the Call to Boycott in Alabama* (Atlanta: SCLC, April 1965), **SHLMP-WHi**.

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