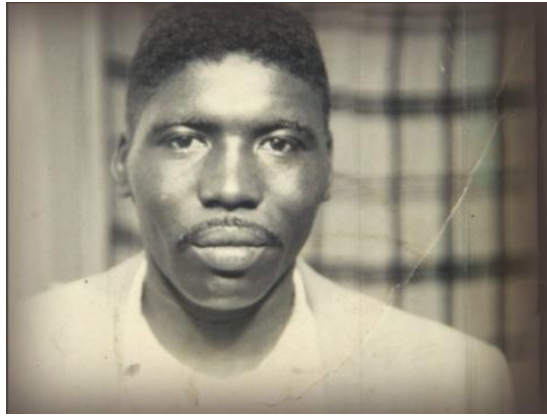




On the night of February 18, 1965 a group of African-Americans gathered at a church in Marion, Alabama. Among those individuals at Zion's Chapel Methodist Church was Jimmie Lee Jackson, a Vietnam-War veteran.

Fighting for his country, however, was not enough in the segregated South for 29-year-old Jimmie Lee to vote. He had tried to register, for several years, but there was always some reason during the Jim-Crow era to keep him from becoming a registered voter.

Inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., people in Marion—a town close to Selma—met to talk about how to change things. Why should American citizens be denied the right to vote when the U.S. Constitution allowed it?

There was a special purpose for the gathering on February 18th. A young civil-rights activist named James Orange, a field secretary for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, was incarcerated at the Perry County jail. Cordy Tindell ("C. T.") Vivian, a close friend of Dr. King, was planning to lead a group of around 500 peaceful protesters on a walk to the nearby jail.

When the marchers reached the post office, they were met by Marion City police officers, sheriff's deputies and Alabama State Troopers who'd formed a line preventing the protestors from moving forward. Somehow the street lights were turned off (to this day it's not clear how that happened).

Under cover of darkness, the police started to beat the marching protestors. Among the injured were Richard Valeriani, a White-House journalist for NBC News, and two cameramen who worked for United Press International.

Jimmie Lee, his Mother (Viola) and his 82-year-old Grandpa (Cager Lee) fled the scene, taking cover at Mack's Café (a restaurant near the church).

Trying to protect his family members, Jimmie Lee sustained two fatal shots in his abdomen. Decades later, James Bonard Fowler (an Alabama State Trooper) admitted that he had fired the shots.

Jackson died of his wounds eight days later. Dr. King spoke at his funeral. Among others were these words of indictment:

A state trooper pointed the gun, but he did not act alone.

He was murdered by the brutality of every sheriff who practices lawlessness in the name of law.

He was murdered by the irresponsibility of every politician, from governors on down, who has fed his constituents the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism.

He was murdered by the timidity of a federal government that can spend millions of dollars a day to keep troops in South Vietnam and cannot protect the rights of its own citizens seeking the right to vote.

He was murdered by the indifference of every white minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of his stained-glass windows.

And he was murdered by the cowardice of every Negro who passively accepts the evils of segregation and stands on the sidelines in the struggle for justice.

Dr. King then led the mourners on a three-mile walk, in the rain, to Jimmie Lee's final resting place at Heard Cemetery (once a burial ground for slaves).



It was to protest the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson that people, planning to march to Montgomery, had gathered in Selma on March 7, 1965. Instead of completing their march, the protestors were met by another line of police officers who would not let them cross the city's bridge.

The violence which erupted against the protestors, by law-enforcement officials, was broadcast throughout America. People were shocked at what they saw, on their television screens.

Among many other questions was this overriding concern: Why were the police, responsible for keeping the peace, harming unarmed protestors?

Jimmie Lee Jackson, however, did not die in vain. The events in Marion, during which Jackson was shot and killed, led to the events in Selma, which led to the passage of the U.S. Voting Rights Act in the summer of 1965.

Credits:

Cordelia Heard Billingsley provided the undated photo of her father, Jimmie Lee Jackson (1938-1965), to NPR.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Jimmie-Lee-Jackson-and-the-Events-in-Selma>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Jimmie-Lee-Jackson-and-the-Events-in-Selma>

Media Stream



MLK Leads Jimmie Jackson Funeral

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Richard Valeriani Injured in Protest March

A journalist for NBC News, in 1965, Richard Valeriani was covering a planned civil-rights march in February of 1965, when he was injured.

It was the same march in which Jimmie Lee Jackson was fatally shot.

Decades later, when he was interviewed for "Eyes on the Prize," Valeriani remembered the events:



The march in Marion, Alabama, was a nighttime march, and a nighttime march was always dangerous. And there was always discussion within the [civil rights] movement whether or not to have nighttime marches because they knew they were dangerous. We went up there this night, and we knew there was going to be trouble right away because local folks came up to us and threatened us, sprayed our cameras with black paint so we couldn't shoot, ordered us to put the cameras down and harassed us. And it was a very tense situation.

Somebody walked up behind me and hit me with a knife handle, hit me in the head with a knife handle, drew blood, which required stitches, and I was taken to a hospital.

But before I left, a white man walked up to me and he said, "Are you hurt? Do you need a doctor?" And I was stunned, and I put my hand to the back of my head and I pulled it back and it was full of blood. And I said to him, "Yeah, I think I do, I'm bleeding."

And then he thrust his face right up against mine and he said, "Well, we don't have doctors for people like you."

This image, online courtesy NBC News (via the Huffington Post) depicts Valeriani in his hospital bed on the 19th of February, 1965.

Image of Richard Valeriani, described above, online courtesy NBC News via the Huffington Post.

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Jimmie Lee Jackson and the Events in Selma

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