

[1965, Mar.]

[Untitled bulletin re Selma Bloody Sunday.

Undated (assumed March 7 or 8, 1965)]

On Sunday, March 7, 1965, between 2,000 and 3,000 people began to march from Selma, Alabama to Montgomery to dramatize their fight for the right to vote in Alabama. The report below tells what happened, as this information came into the Atlanta, SNCC office over the WATS line, and the actions taken by SNCC people in Atlanta and Jackson, Mississippi as these events occurred.

At approximately 3:00 p.m. Willie Emma Scott, Negro, a member of the SNCC staff working in Selma reported that the march from Selma to Montgomery was about to begin. People were in the process of organizing into companies and squads, with company commanders and squad leaders. John Lewis, Chairman of SNCC, Robert Mants, a member of the SNCC staff, and Hosea Williams of the staff of SCLC were leading the march.

A short while later Larry Fox, another member of the SNCC staff, reported that the demonstrators were now at the bridge over the Alabama River, walking double file. On the other side of the bridge, awaiting the marchers, stood a group of state troopers, a large number of local white citizens, Sheriff Clark and his possemen, and Al Lingo, head of the state highway patrol. Leading the march were Lewis, Mants and Williams. SNCC staff members Wilson Brown, Jerry Harrison, Frank Soracco, John Luitkys and Chris Wylie, and SCLC member Eugene Pritchett were interspersed among the demonstrators -- one for every 50 people. Three other SNCC staff members, Larry Fox, Willie Emma Scott and Annie Pearl Avery were stationed at Brown's Chapel, the Negro church which has served as headquarters for civil rights activities in Selma in recent weeks. At 3:45 p.m. Fox called back and reported that SCLC members Andy Young, James Bevel, Ben Clark and Harry Boyd were also on hand.

At this point SNCC staff people in Atlanta became more and more concerned about the possibilities of what might happen to the people participating in the march, especially given the fact that Martin Luther King was not present, and any restraining influence on local police authorities which King's presence might have provided was thereby eliminated. The SNCC staff working in Selma had been basically opposed to the idea of the march, primarily because they thought the danger to the people involved was greater than the objectives and any possible achievements of the march warranted. The SNCC staff working in Selma had expressed their opposition at a meeting held between SNCC staff and SCLC staff in Selma on Friday, March 5. At that time, the SNCC staff had agreed to provide radios, the use of the WATS line, and the services of the Medical Committee on Human Rights for this march. At a meeting of the SNCC Executive Committee held on Friday, March 5 and Saturday, March 6 in Atlanta, the question of the march was the subject of six or seven hours of intensive discussion. Many members of the Executive Committee expressed their opposition to the march, but decided that, in view of their concern for and commitment to the local people, SNCC would provide the assistance previously agreed to by the Selma

SNCC staff, and that, further, individual members of SNCC who chose to would support the march by participating in it. The Executive Committee voted to send a letter to Dr. King expressing certain disagreements over the relationship between SCLC and SNCC, and requesting a meeting with him. In light of these decisions, and in view of the fact that the situation in Selma appeared to be heading toward a crisis, four SNCC staff members -- Ivarhoe Donaldson, Courtland Cox, Roy Shields, and Ralph Featherstone -- made arrangements for a chartered flight out of Atlanta which would get them to Selma as quickly as possible.

At 4:00 p.m. Lafayette Surney, SNCC staff member reported from a phone booth on a corner near where the march was taking place, that between 2,000 and 3,000 people were marching. Mr. Albert Turner, a Negro, head of the Perry County Voters' League, had joined Lewis, Mants, and Williams in leading the march. The decision had been reached that if the police stopped the people, they would remain at the bridge until tear gas was used to force them to leave.

Lafayette reported that John Lewis and Andy Young had both made brief statements to the press at that point. Lewis's statement explained why the demonstrators were marching. Young stated that Dr. King would not be present because he had decided, after hearing that Gov. Wallace of Alabama had empowered the state troopers to use every necessary measure to stop the march, that he should work on getting as much Northern support for the Selma demonstrators as possible. One SCLC minister vowed that SCLC would bring ministers from all over the country into Selma to support the Selma demonstrators.

Meanwhile a considerable number of SNCC staff members, including Program Director Cleveland Sellers, were in Jackson, Mississippi attending a meeting of COFO. Seeing that the COFO meeting was operating well, and feeling that it was not imperative that SNCC staff people stay at that meeting, some members of the SNCC staff made plans to go to Selma; four carloads of staff began to head over to Selma.

At 4:06 p.m. Lafayette Surney again called the Atlanta SNCC office and reported that two carloads of possemen had just gone to the bridge where the people were gathered. Police officials were ordering all local white citizens to go indoors. A SNCC staff member, Annie Pearl Avery had been arrested; no one knew at that point what the charges were. (It was later reported that Annie Pearl had been walking down the street and had been stopped by a policeman who told her she couldn't walk. She replied that the street was a public street and she had a right to walk there if she wanted to. She was then arrested.) Two local white people had also been arrested. Three doctors and six or seven nurses from the Medical Committee on Human Rights, as well as three ambulances were reported to be on hand in anticipation of possible violence.

A few moments later all Hell broke loose in Selma. Lafayette Surney's reports to Atlanta at the time capture that scene:

- 4:15 p.m. State troopers are throwing tear gas at the people. A few are running back. A few are being blinded by tear gas. Somebody has been hurt -- I don't know who.... They're beating them and throwing tear gas at them.
- 4:16 p.m. Police are beating people on the streets. Oh, man, they're just picking them up and putting them in ambulances. People are getting hurt pretty bad. There were two people on the ground in pretty bad shape.... I'm going to leave in a few minutes.... People are running back this way.
- 4:17 p.m. Ambulances are going by with their sirens going. People are running, crying, telling what's happening.
- 4:18 p.m. Police are pushing people into alleys. I don't know why. People are screaming, hollering. They're bringing on more ambulances. People are running, hollering, crying....
- 4:20 p.m. Here come the white hoodlums. I'm on the corner of one of the main streets. One lady screamed "They're trying to kill me."
- 4:26 p.m. They're going back to the church. I'm going too....

In the face of all of the mobilized force of the state -- troopers, possemen, the Sheriff, and mobs of local white people -- the Negro demonstrators decided to return to Brown's Chapel and decide what they would do from that point on.

From inside the church John Lewis gives his account of what had taken place:

"People marched -- 1500 to 2000 of them; they marched down Highway 80, across the bridge. At the other side of the bridge were 200 state troopers, 200 possemen, and about 1,000 white people. The Major of the State Troopers announced that they should turn around; the people refused. They knelt to the ground in a prayerful manner. Then the state troopers fired tear gas at them and began to beat them. I was hit in the head.

"People went back to the church. There are about 2,000 - 3,000 people in the church. The posse is coming down to the church. People on horseback are beating the people with whips and ropes. They are shooting tear gas.

"I've never seen anything like it in my life. They are shooting gas, acid. One very old lady I know has a broken arm."

In response to these reports from Selma, the Atlanta communications department was beginning to move. Julian Bond, who heads communications and who was spending Sunday afternoon at home, reported to the office and began drafting press releases on the Selma situation. His brother James had begun to tape the WATS reports as they came into Atlanta from Selma. Julian began making contact with various radio stations, asking them if they wished to use the tapes. One network, CBS informed Julian that their men were on the scene in Selma and already had live tapes; they requested that Julian go over to the Atlanta SCLC office and tape

a statement By Martin Luther King for them.

At the same time, Jim Forman, SNCC's Executive Secretary, was on the phone arranging flights for six more SNCC staff people to go to Selma, and arranging for Hertz rent-a-car service to pick up SNCC staff as they arrived and carry them into Selma. Meanwhile, about 12 SNCC staff people and volunteers began typing up, mimeographing and mailing out special statements to Friends of SNCC groups across the country and to the press. The statement to the Friends of SNCC groups urged them to:

- publicize the situation in Selma on their campuses and in their communities
- plan demonstrations and other forms of protest against police brutality and denial of constitutional rights
- demand federal action -- including the arrest of Sheriff Jim Clark for violation of Civil Rights Codes -- immediately
- ask local papers to carry complete stories on Selma now and in the future.

Meanwhile reports continued to come in from Selma. At 5:30 p.m. Larry Fox called to report that Brown's Chapel was now surrounded by possemen, state troopers, and Sheriff Clark. The entire street on which the Church was located was being blocked off, so that no one could enter or leave the church. People were being forced back into their homes with billy clubs.

At 6:15 a rumor, originating from a funeral home in the area, circulates that if people don't leave the church, it will be raided by state troopers. Tear gas is being shot into a private home on the same street as the church.

At 6:20 a SNCC worker reports that John Lewis is now in the hospital, possibly with a fractured skull.

At 6:21 p.m. the people at Brown's Chapel report that they have been to the airport to check on the arrival of the SNCC staff people, but had found no one there. (The SNCC staff people arrived later.) The people from the Chapel report that it was difficult getting out of the church and back in again.

At 6:30 it is reported that state troopers and possemen have left the scene.

In the Atlanta office people working on getting out mailings by that evening, run into an unanticipated problem. Only \$80 worth of stamps remain in the postage machine, hardly enough to meet the emergency needs. The post office is called; they have on hand 15 air mail special stamps, and 300 eight cent stamps, which are quickly purchased, so that the mailings can be completed.

At approximately 6:40 p.m. Forman's secretary placed a call to the Atlanta SCLC office and asked to speak with Dr. King. The person answering explains that Dr. King is busy preparing a statement and cannot be disturbed. Forman's secretary leaves word that Dr. King

should call him when he is free.

At 7:20 p.m. John Lewis, SNCC Chairman, is reported to be in the emergency room of the hospital, with the possibility of a concussion.

At 8:30 p.m. the people at the church are beginning a mass meeting. Following the mass meeting people dispersed to their homes for the night. It was announced that the march would be continued on Tuesday, and that Dr. King would be present.

In the meantime, the Atlanta SNCC office began checking with the Jackson and Meridian, Miss. COFO offices as to the whereabouts of the four carloads of SNCC people who had headed over from Jackson to Selma. It was learned that two of the cars had been turned around 10 miles west of Meridian, by state highway patrolmen. Upon further checking it was learned that the drivers had been charged with improper passing and reckless driving and fined a total of \$150. The money was put up and the drivers released. Since three of the four cars which had left Jackson were equipped with car radios, Forman advised that they continue on to Selma; the fourth car, which had no radio, remained in Meridian for reasons of safety.

Finally, SNCC's Executive Secretary, Jim Forman took action in response to the appearance of Sheriff Jim Clark of Selma on ABC's "Issues and Answers" program today, March 7. In this program Sheriff Clark stated that there had been no problem insofar as Negroes were concerned in Selma until outside agitators came in to stir up trouble. He said that prior to the coming of the civil rights movement to Selma Negroes had simply gone down to the courthouse in an attempt to register, and had either passed or failed, with no commotion being created over the matter. Clark accused Dr. King of engaging in a personal vendetta against him. With regard to Clark's use of possemen and cattle prods to control demonstrators, Clark explained that the posse had not been created for the purpose of dealing with civil rights incidents, but that it has, since the time of its creation, received very extensive training in riot control. Cattle prods, he stated were the most humane form of controlling demonstrations, because they did no harm to the people. Clark remarked also that he felt the press had dealt with him very unfairly, and had misrepresented his actions.

In response to this program, Forman wrote the following telegram to the American Broadcasting Company:

"On your Issues and Answers program today, Sheriff James Clark of Dallas County, Alabama grossly misrepresented conditions in Dallas County with respect to the constitutional rights of Negroes, the motivation, character and purpose of civil rights workers stationed there, and the desires and aspirations of the Negro people of Selma and Dallas County, Alabama.

stationed there, and the desires and aspirations of the Negro people of Selma and Dallas County, Alabama. This is not only our claim, but the claim of the U.S. Department of Justice in its suit seeking a Federal injunction restraining Clark from continuing precisely those practices he denies exist in Dallas County. We feel the most elementary fairness, as outlined in the FCC's "Editorialization by Broadcast Licenses" (13 FCC Reports 1246, 1250, June 1, 1949), requires that you provide us with equal time on your next Issues and Answers program so that we may correct the misstatements and distortions which Clark disseminated today through the nationwide facilities of your TV network. We shall expect to hear from you without delay.

James Forman
Executive Secretary
Student Nonviolent Coordinating
Committee

Last notes: Word was recieved at the Atlanta office that the SNCC staff members going from Mississippi to Selma had arrived safely in Selma. Signing off at 3:00 a.m., all is quiet.

Atlanta SNCC Office