



Raintree
FREESTYLE

On the Front Line

STRUGGLING FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

Stephanie Fitzgerald

Making news

James Farmer was the founder of CORE. He remembered:

“We had the specific intention of creating a crisis. We were counting on the **bigots** in the South to do our work for us... the government would have to respond if we created a situation that was headline news all over the world.”

Freedom rides

The same year that the “Greensboro Four” succeeded at ending segregation at lunch counters, a black man called Bruce Boynton was refused service in a bus station lunchroom. Boynton then sued the State of Virginia and won his case: the **Supreme Court** ruled that segregation in interstate bus and train stations was illegal. Again, despite the ruling, most bus stations in the southern United States continued to provide separate lunchrooms, waiting rooms and restrooms for black people and white people.

In February 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) decided to test the Supreme Court ruling. They would send ‘freedom riders’ – black and white – onto buses and into terminals throughout the southern United States. The riders would travel from Washington DC to New Orleans, Louisiana.

This map shows the route taken by the freedom riders in 1961.



It was planned that as the freedom riders were travelling, black riders would use facilities marked for whites only and white riders would use facilities meant for blacks only. Twelve people volunteered to ride the buses. The youngest was 17 years old, the oldest was 61.

Brave volunteers

The freedom riders knew they might be arrested. Each one was ready to go to jail. They also knew there was a very good chance they would be attacked. However, each rider was committed to non-violent resistance. No matter what happened, they would not meet violence with violence. They would protest with words and actions, but never with fists. They were scared, but they knew what had to be done.

Black and white freedom riders sit together in the "whites only" section of a bus station waiting room in 1961.



Into the danger zone

On 4 May 1961, the volunteers and CORE founder James Farmer boarded their buses. At the beginning of the trip, no one really bothered the students. Real trouble started as soon as the buses arrived in Birmingham, Alabama. When the riders on one bus reached the Birmingham terminal there were no police around. That was unusual, and dangerous. In place of the police was a hostile crowd. Police Chief Eugene “Bull” Connor had kept police away so that protesters could beat up the freedom riders. This they did. Some of the riders had to be taken to hospital.

Never give up

When another bus reached the city of Anniston, Alabama, an angry mob surrounded the bus and then attacked it.

These freedom riders in Alabama in 1961 stand helplessly by as their bus burns.



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Looking for trouble

Alabama governor John Patterson said in response to the violence against the freedom riders:

“When you go somewhere looking for trouble, you usually find it... You just can’t guarantee the safety of a fool and that’s what these folks are, just fools.”

Someone threw a firebomb through a window. As the riders ran from the burning bus, they were beaten up by the crowd. The police refused to help. CORE leaders decided to cancel the rest of the trip. However, new volunteers were ready to continue the ride. When their bus arrived in Montgomery, Alabama, it was met by another angry crowd. Again, many volunteers were beaten up but as some of them were injured or arrested new volunteers took their place.

Freedom riders win

The students' refusal to give up brought a lot of attention to the struggle for **civil rights**. That autumn, the Interstate Commerce Commission issued new rules that would **enforce integration** on buses. Segregated bus stations disappeared throughout the South.

Government support

The work of the freedom riders forced the United States government to take a stand on civil rights. President John F. Kennedy supported the civil rights movement and sent **federal marshals** to Alabama to protect the students.

US National Guardsmen protect the bus as freedom riders make the trip from Montgomery, Alabama, to Jackson, Mississippi.



federal marshals police officers who work for the United States government
National Guardsmen US military troops who help during emergencies