Defender Writer Tells Ala. Terror

By BETTY WASHINGTON

SELMA, Ala.—To be in Selma, Ala., and not know fear is to exist in a fairy world.

For the dread of being subjected to a brutal attack plaguing even the most militant right leaders and palliates one's senses into sluggish fright.

I have never known such fear as was experienced on my first night here, when I allowed myself the expensive privilege of forgetting my dinky presence alone could be sufficient reason to stir hatred and an attempt at violence.

What started out to be a quiet evening meal in the company of Rev. Willis Tabor, a Chicago minister, ended in a rather tense match in which we—under other circumstances—would have been handed a trophy. The running was quiet, and for the most part stationery, but inside we were feeling.

Our 'Hell' was the Holiday Inn Restaurant located in the Holiday Hotel, just outside of Selma. Many right demonstrators had come there to have supper.

When the Rev. Mr. Tabor and I entered the eating place, we found ourselves the only Negro present, not in the company of white associates. Others were clergymen, seated at the front of the establishment, before a window, we observed toothpicks and discussed the day's events for nearly an hour before our order was finally taken. Some time later we were served coffee and a salad, but no food was in evidence.

When finally my companion complained to the management that we were not being served, a white waiters in a quiet huff explained that he had had a busy night and that we could expect our meals shortly. This did not happen.

When our meal was finally plunked before us, the food was cold. It was obvious to us that it had been allowed to sit.

After one forkful I informed the minister that I did not intend to eat or pay for cold food. We asked to have our supper returned. In the interim two circumstances evolved that made us for danger.

First, the other demonstrators upon completing their meals had begun to file out. In addition, Rev. Tabor, had scribbled an angry message to the management on a napkin.

He had planned, he said, to hand it to the maître d' as we left. The message read, "We have been waiting patiently for a long period of time seeking to be served food we really need. It was interesting to observe how all the customisers who came in after us were served before we were.

"We made a complaint which we presume was the reason for added delay in our being served. If we were in error in making the complaint, we apologize. It is our prayer that you will forgive us."

This latter was to become another obstacle to our continued good health.

Our errors in judgment were in continuing to allow more evidence that something foul was brewing. Our first hint that we were in danger came from the faces of the Negro men and women whose duty it was to clear the tables.

As we ate, they spoke to us with their eyes and with their movements. Not a word passed between us. Yet fear began to fill the atmosphere as strongly as if they had shouted: "Run for your lives." The tension had become so electric that eating was impossible.

After my companion paid the bill he called for a Negro taxi cab. The line was busy. He then asked a black clerk for the number of another cab company and was told, 'I am sorry— I don't have that information.' Placing the call to the Negro cab company for the second time, we were informed he would be along shortly.

Rather than stand outside in the dark, we took seats on a salmon-covered leather sofa in the lobby and were immediately confronted by three white men who had emerged from the hotel office. One of them asked in a loud voice, 'Are you registered here?'

My friend answered, "No, we are not." The well-dressed white man replied, "Please get up, we are." As two of the three men forged themselves into the leather sofa, I asked, unthinking, if they would like...

SELMA MARCHERS MARK TIME

Civil rights demonstrators in Selma, Ala., display varying clothing styles as they battle to keep warm in damp, chilly breeze which swept the street where they camped out during the night. They vowed to stay in the street until police arrested them or allowed them to proceed with their march. (UPI Telephoto)
Selma

to have the whole sofa. The
same one looked at me and
harshly responded, "No.
What had been the apprehen
ation sprang into such
horror that we began to pray for
the arrival of the coach.

By this time, the world
had been exchanged that there
were meant to terrify us. They suc
ceeded.

Outwardly cool, it would
have been impossible to rea
like the extent of our anxiety.
On the other hand, it is pos
sible they interpreted our out
ward composure to be fear
inspired arrogance.

The situation by this time
had evolved into a man
manipulated by the hands of the
clock. When I joined the cler
kis, who was standing near
the entrance, I decided we
could not face alone, what
evidently was to come, and placed
a call to Brown Chapel, central
meeting place for the demonstra
strators.

I had hoped, and did pre
sume, someone would come
after us or at least inform
them of our situation should
they arrive too late. The line
at the church was busy, but
four fates began to form a
protest picture impossible to
fight from the imagination.

It was at this point that my
minister friend came to the
booth and whispered to me,"A
group of troops are gathering
outside. Things don't look
right. Tell them you're my
sister."

As I attempted to reach the
church office for the second
time, I thought how useless
it would be to attempt to barri
cade myself in a dusty
booth and wondered if others
in the movement, in the
movement itself, should be en
dangered by asking them to
spoon the two of us out of the
jam.

I was at this point that my
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Emotion was the victor,
and I placed the call against
the result.

As the line was busy,
under such circumstances I
logically
go, one would ask the opera
ator to interrupt the call for
an emergency or simply announce
the police. Neither of these acts
would have brought the res
ults in Selma, they have never
harnessed our plight.

I thanked God we had
Tabor beckoned to me that
the tax had finally arrived.
With all deliberate speed we
walked out of our first "Hall" and
into the second. Not 59 feet from
us stood a band, a six club and
pipe carrying white youths.

One of them menacingly
held a shining silver object. I
see it now, without hesitation,
to determine what kind of in
strument it was. As we walked
to the car, they turned in our
direction, their eyes filled with
hatred. Still terrified we expe
rienced the situation before the
driver and asked him to get us
away from there as fast as pos
sible.

Upon entering Brown Chapel,
we were caught up in a storm
of beautiful brown people
with smiling white faces
touched in, and were in the process
of regaining our composure when
it was announced that three
Unitarian-Universalist minis
ters had been attacking the
streets of Selma and that one
of them had been beaten into
unconsciousness.

We then felt the weight of
answered prayer as we joined
the congregation in the com
munion that Rev. James Reeb's life
would be spared.

Selma is not like any other
little town. It is infected with
vermin of racial hatred. To be
here is to slowly suffocate, al
though the skies are fair and
the temperature comfortable.
In the comfort index registers zero.