

# Deacons for Defense

***Africans in the South decide to protect their own communities from the Ku Klux Klan.***



*Charles Sims, one of the Deacons for Defense leaders, dares the Ku Klux Klan to attack protesting Blacks.*

Not all Africans in the South believed in Dr. King's nonviolent philosophy, especially African men. Some of these men had fought in wars for the United States. These men had fought in World War II in the 1940s, or in the Korean War in 1950, and still others had fought in Vietnam in the 1960's. Their years fighting in other countries had shown them that segregation was not practiced everywhere. They had fought for democracy in these other countries, and they were ready to fight for democracy in America.

The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) sent volunteers to the South to help organize nonviolent protests against segregation. The volunteers worked with Africans in the South to help them desegregate public facilities, such as libraries and restaurants, and also to vote. CORE believed in nonviolent protests. CORE volunteers would teach Africans about nonviolence, and show them how to protect themselves if they were attacked.

During peaceful demonstrations the civil rights volunteers were often attacked by

white mobs, and received no protection from the police. Later at night the Ku Klux Klan would attack civil rights workers and Africans at their homes. Many civil rights workers were killed during this time. When the KKK attempted to frighten Africans in Jonesboro, Louisiana in 1964 they were in for a big surprise.

They didn't realize that a large group of African men had organized themselves to protect their community. These men were armed and would attack if the police or KKK tried to harm Africans in their community. Soon this group came to be known as the Deacons for Defense. This wasn't the first time that Africans in the South had decided to defend themselves. However, it was the first time that a group announced publicly that they would protect their community.

Although about twenty men helped form the first group, two of the key men were **Frederick Kirkpatrick** and **Earnest Thomas**. Both men had fought in the wars, and knew how to use weapons and organize a militia. The men felt that they had to defend the nonviolent protestors, since

the police and the federal government were unwilling to do anything.

The Deacons for Defense were a well organized group. The men organized patrol groups that either walked or drove through the community. They provided security when civil rights workers met, and escorted these workers when they tried to help Africans register to vote. They met every week. Most of the men were older church members, and anyone who wanted to join had to have good character. They didn't want anyone who had a temper or didn't want to follow instructions. Each member was required to pay \$2 dues in each month. The dues were used to purchase more weapons, ammunition, two-way radios, and pay for gas to patrol in cars.

CORE encouraged the men to accept nonviolence, but the Deacons disagreed. Without the Deacons for Defense providing security, nonviolent civil rights protestors would not have been successful. If you were to attend a civil rights meeting at night in Jonesboro, Louisiana you would probably see armed Deacons on rooftops, guarding the doors to the meeting, and patrolling the

area. You might have even been escorted to the meeting by a Deacon.

When civil rights organizers tried to desegregate the library in Jonesboro the local police would not allow them to enter the library, but later they returned with the Deacons and they were able to desegregate the library and eventually other places as well.

The group expanded to help other Black communities in Louisiana. The group in Jonesboro, helped to organize a chapter in Bogalusa, Louisiana as well as other cities in Louisiana and Mississippi. The KKK in Bogalusa was feared by many people, but the Deacons were unafraid. They sent a flyer to nearly every white home in the community, which said that they would kill anyone caught burning crosses. Soon the KKK knew that they were in trouble. During one demonstration a white mob of mainly KKK members were beating peaceful demonstrators, when a Deacon yelled at them to stop. They didn't listen, so he took his gun and shot it in the air to warn them, but they continued to attack the protestors. He then turned and shot one of the attacking whites, who was also a Klansman. The Klansman survived the attack, but from that day, the KKK leaders could get almost no whites to participate in attacks against Africans. The Deacons had showed people that the Klansmen were really just cowards.

Even the police began to respect them. Students at Jackson High School, an all

Black school, were tired of the terrible conditions at their school. Their books were tattered and worn, there were almost no books in the library, the children didn't receive a real education and were only being trained to be servants for whites. In fact, the children were frequently taken to the white school administrator's house to mow his lawn!

With the help of CORE, the students boycotted the school and demanded change. City officials threatened to attack the high school students if they didn't end the boycott. The officials sent police and firefighters to the school to break up the boycott. In other cities, the firefighters would turn their water hoses on the demonstrators. The water was so forceful it felt like it was ripping their skin off! But not in Bogalusa.

When the police and firefighters arrived they found the Deacons already waiting. One of the Deacons spoke to the police, and said, "If you turn that water hose on those kids, there's going to be some blood out here today". They never did. Soon the governor of Louisiana agreed to the

students demands, and people in the country who were tired of letting whites attack them while they protested peacefully, were seeing that self-defense might be a better strategy.

Africans in northern cities, such as Detroit and Harlem had already developed an organization that practiced self-defense. It was a religious organization, called the Nation of Islam.



The Deacons threatened to kill anyone caught burning a cross.