

The Honorable John R. Lewis
U.S. Representative of Georgia (1987–2020)

Bloody Sunday

The Honorable John R. Lewis recounts what took place on March 7, 1965, in Selma, Alabama.
Interview recorded December 11, 2014

People must understand that we were committed to peace, to the way of nonviolence, and we were so orderly, so quiet, no one saying a word. It was the most disciplined march that I've ever been a part of, walking in twos, not interfering with traffic, not talking loud, not any singing. We got to the highest point on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, down below we saw a sea of blue. Alabama State Troopers. We continued to walk until we came within hearing distance of the state troopers. A man spoke up and said, "I'm Major John Cloud of the Alabama State Troopers. This is an unlawful march. It will not be allowed to continue. I'll give you three minutes to disperse, return to your homes or to your church." And a young man from Dr. King's organization walking with me, beside me, one of the leaders by the name of Hosea Williams, said, "Major, give us a moment to kneel and pray," and the Major said, "Troopers, advance." You saw these men putting on their gas masks and behind the state troopers are a group of men, part of the sheriff's posse, on horses. They came toward us, beating us with nightsticks, tramping us with horses, and releasing their tear gas. I was hit in the head by a state trooper with a nightstick. My legs went from under me. I don't know how I made it back across the bridge, but apparently a group just literally took me back. I remember being back at Brown Chapel AME Church—that we had left from—and they asked me to say something to the audience and I said something like, "I don't understand it, how President Johnson can send troops to Vietnam but cannot send troops to Selma, Alabama, to protect people who only desire to register to vote." And the next thing I knew or realized, that I was being taken to the local hospital with 16 other people. I think 17 of us were hurt that day, and a group of nuns took care of us.