" BABE , I'M GOING TO ALABAMA "

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Author: KEN FIREMAN Free Press staff reporter

Tony Liuzzo's long journey began on the night of March 25, 1965, in the snug brick frame house on Marlowe in northwest Detroit where he lived with his mother, father and four brothers and sisters.

Tony, then 10 years old, was lying asleep with his older brother Tom, their beds side-by-side in an upstairs bedroom. He recalls hearing loud noises from downstairs. His sister Penny was shouting, calling him by his childhood nickname of Nino.

"We were sleeping, " Tony says, "and I heard Penny screaming, "Nino, Tommy, Tommy, Nino -- Mamma's dead, Mamma's dead.' And I remember waking up, and I heard it, but I didn't believe it. It was like a dream. I really thoug ht I was dreaming.

"And then I felt my brother fly across the bed and get up, and it was like it was worse than a dream. It was a nightmare that was real."

Eight hundred miles away, on a deserted **Alabama** highway, Tony's mother, 39-year-old Viola Gregg Liuzzo, had been shot **to** death that night by Ku Klux Klansmen as she ferried demonstrators back **to** their homes after the Selma- **to** -Montgomery civil rights march.

The shots that rang out that night echoed through Tony Liuzzo's life for many years. They led him on a strange journey **to** some strange places -- **to** musty files of newspaper clippings in public libraries, **to** FBI headquarters in Washington, **to** a federal courtroom in downtown Detroit.

And finally, in February of this year, they led him **to** the same **Alabama** highway on which his mother died, where about 100 marchers, with Tony in the van, again walked the 50 miles between Selma and Montgomery **to** campaign for renewal of the federal Voting Rights Act.

As the marchers entered Montgomery Feb. 18 and headed for the **Alabama** capitol, their numbers swelled **to** several thousand. At the capitol, they halted at the west front, under a statue of Jefferson Davis, near the spot where Davis was inaugurated as president of the Confederacy on the same date 121 years earlier.

Midway through the two-hour rally that followed, Tony Liuzzo stepped **to** the microphone. "I've been labeled all my life a nigger lover because of what my mother did," he told the crowd. "If that's what I am, then God love it. I've seen things on this march that have turned my life totally. It's shown me a path, and **I'm going to** walk down it."

After 17 years, Tony Liuzzo's path had finally recrossed his mother's.

The South has always occupied a special place in America's national consciousness. Earlier Americans, lacking the strong unifying forces of king, culture or historic tradition enjoyed by European nations, filled the void by creating a series of myths, peculiarly American in origin and content. The South -- rural, underdeveloped, feudal in its social structure -- always loomed large in these myths: Huck Finn and Jim floating down the Mississippi on their raft, Little Liza fleeing **to** freedom with the slave hunters' hounds snapping at her heels, gallant cavalry officers riding **to** their deaths on Civil War battlefields as gracious belles mourned their passing.

More recently, in the 1960s, the South occupied another role, as the stage of a great morality play where the lingering demons of our past racial sins could be exorcised through the traditional methods of pilgrimage, hymn and sacrifice.

In those days, the South served everyone's purposes. For diehard racists, it was the ideal place for a final stand against the "race mixers"; after all, if segregation could not be preserved in Dixie, where could it? For civil rights activists, it was the equally perfect place for an assault on racial injustice, for nowhere else could the issues be drawn so starkly or so favorably.

And for the great mass of white Americans, emotionally uninvolved in the struggle but vaguely uneasy over the accumulated hypocrisies of racism, the South provided an ideal safety valve for their fears. They could watch the growing conflict, sympathize quietly with the good guys, and preserve the illusion that racism was a regional and not a national problem.

If this great civil rights drama had a climax, certainly it came on the day Viola Liuzzo died. Three weeks before that day, a group of voting rights demonstrators starting out on a march from Selma **to** Montgomery had been clubbed, teargassed and routed by **Alabama** state troopers. The news media quickly transmitted photos and film of the incident, exposing the brutality of the troopers for all the world **to** see. Overnight, **Alabama** became a global symbol of official bigotry and lawlessness.

Civil rights leaders, sensing the favorable national mood, vowed **to** march again, with Martin Luther King leading the parade. Movement lawyers obtained federal court orders prohibi ting local interference. In Washington, liberal Democrats, fresh from their greatest electoral victory since the 1930s, readied legislation **to** break the white stranglehold on Southern ballot boxes. President Lyndon Johnson federalized the **Alabama** National Guard and ordered them **to** protect the marchers.

What had begun as a purely local march was transformed, by the blundering brutality of **Alabama** officials, into a great national demonstration. More than 5,000 people made the full five-day trek. When they reached the state capitol on March 25, 1965, their ranks had swelled **to** nearly 25,000. As Gov. George Wallace quietly slipped out a back door **to** avoid the marchers, King's soaring oratory echoed off the whitewashed walls of the capitol, sounding a death knell for Southern white supremacy.

One of the people standing in front of the capitol listening **to** King that day was a 39-year-old housewife and part-time college student from northwest Detroit named Viola Liuzzo.

By the standards of the day, Viola Liuzzo should not have been there. She was married, she had five young children, she had responsibilities at home. Taking classes at Wayne State and sympathizing with the civil rights struggle from afar was one thing, according **to** the conventional wisdom. Leaving home and family **to** go marching down an **Alabama** highway carrying a sign was quite another.

But Vi Liuzzo was not fond of following the conventional wisdom. She had seen films of the **Alabama** troopers' violence on television, and she was angry. Some college friends of hers were **going to** Selma, and she decided **to** join them. She called her husband, Anthony Sr., from a campus pay phone, informed him of her decision, piled her friends into her 1963 Oldsmobile and headed south.

It was not the first time she had chafed at the traditional role of a married woman in a male-dominated society. Eighteen months earlier, in the fall of 1963, she had summed up her frustrations in a college notebook. Under the heading "Personal convictions and objectives," she had written: "Protest attitude of great majority of men who hold **to** conviction that any married woman who is unable **to** find contentment and self-satisfaction when confined **to** homemaking displays lack of emotional health."

Once in **Alabama** , she plunged into the work of helping **to** organize the march. Veterans of the occasion recall her as friendly, energetic and anxious **to** help. On the day the march ended, she volunteered **to** ferry marchers back **to** their homes in her Oldsmobile.

Says Tony: "I talked **to** some people down there (this February) -- James Owens, he's on the staff of SCLC (the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which co-ordinated both the 1965 and 1982 marches)."

Tony says Owens told him: "We told her, "Vi, don't go out there. There's no reason for you. We've got trucks, we've got buses; there's no reason for you **to** use your car on that highway.' She said, "No, I've got **to** go. I've got **to** go.' She was called out on that highway that night. And she went. '

Liuzzo loaded her car with marchers from the Selma area and swung out onto U.S.-80, a four-lane, divided highway that connects Selma and Montgomery. After dropping them off in Selma, she headed back toward Montgomery, accompanied by 19-year-old Leroy Moton, **to** pick up another load of marchers.

Soon another car appeared in Liuzzo's rear-view mirror. It was occupied by four white men -- Eugene Thomas, Collie Leroy Wilkins, William Orville Eaton and Gary Thomas Rowe. All were members of the Birmingham klavern of the Ku Klux Klan, the most dangerous and violent klavern in the South. All were armed.

The Klansmen gave chase, and soon the two cars were hurtling down U.S.-80 at speeds of 80 and 90 m.p.h. Moton later said Liuzzo kept ahead of the Klan car for about 20 miles, all the while singing "We Shall Overcome" and other freedom songs. But as they neared the Lowndesboro crossroads, about halfway between Selma and Montgomery, the Klan car swung into the left lane and pulled abreast of the Oldsmobile. At least two shots rang out. One bullet struck Viola Liuzzo just under the end of her jawbone, shattered her spinal cord and lodged at the base of her brain, killing her instantly.

The Oldsmobile veered off the road, swung into a ditch and came **to** rest against an embankment. The Klansmen sped away into the night. Moton, bruised and shaken but otherwise uninjured, fled from the car, hitched a ride into Selma and reported the shooting.

The following morning, as a shocked nation digested the news of the bloody aftermath **to** the Montgomery march, a visibly angry President Johnson appeared on national television, flanked by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover and Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach. He announced that three Klan members -- Thomas, Wilkins and Eaton, but not Rowe -- had been arrested for Liuzzo's murder and denounced the Klan as "a hooded society of bigots."

It quickly became clear that Rowe was an FBI informer who was prepared **to** testify against the other Klansmen. He did so in both a state court, where the men were tried for murder, and a federal court, where they were charged with violating Liuzzo's civil rights. At both trials Rowe testified that he had pretended **to** fire at Liuzzo, but had not actually done so, and that he had been powerless **to** prevent the murder.

The three defendants were acquitted of murder, but convicted on the federal charges and sentenced **to** 10 years in prison.

Liuzzo's murder crystallized national sentiment against Southern resistance **to** civil rights. Despite recurrent rumors that her motives for being in **Alabama** were less than pure, public revulsion against the murder ran high. Within weeks of her death, comprehensive legislation guaranteeing blacks the right **to** vote was passed by Congress and signed into law.

The law has been described by black leaders as the most effective civil rights measure ever enacted. Blacks in the South had been systematically denied the franchise since the late 19th Century; now, federal officials were empowered **to** intervene directly in those states **to** register voters. The effect was immediate and revolutionary; by the mid-1970s the law had literally changed the political structure of the South.

But back in Detroit, the surviving members of the Liuzzo family were attempting **to** pick up the pieces of their lives in the wake of Viola's death -- and they were not succeeding.

For one thing, not everyone viewed Viola Liuzzo as a heroic symbol. Detroit was still a majority-white city in 1965, and many white residents wanted no part of the civil rights revolution, either in **Alabama** or closer **to** home. Crosses were burned on the Liuzzos' front lawn, Tony says; garbage and rocks were thrown at them, and their home was deluged with hate mail. Things became so bad, he says, that his father hired armed guards **to** patrol the house around the clock.

Tony says his father, a business agent for the Teamsters Union, began drinking heavily following Viola's death and soon developed a serious alcohol problem. He never remarried and never really got his drinking under control. He suffered a serious stroke in 1977 and died the following year. Shortly before his death, he and two other men pleaded guilty in Recorder's Court **to** charges of attempting **to** burn down a Detroit market for insurance money.

"It aged him a matter of 10 years in just a short period of time," Tony says. "You could see him totally age from the grief, from the aftermath, from what he saw his children **going** through."

Tony says his sisters Penny and Mary and his brother Tom all left home at early ages after their mother's death. Tom and Mary, he says, both became heavy drug users for a time. He and Tom were high school dropouts, something he says his mother would never have permitted had she lived.

Penny and Mary are married now and live in California. Tony's youngest sister, Sally, is also married and lives in Farmington. The family doesn't know where Tom is today.

Most of the family's problems, Tony believes, are traceable **to** his mother's death.

"It tore the family structure apart," he says. "It was like she was the nucleus, and we revolved around her. And when you take the nucleus away, what happens? You have a nuclear explosion, right? It would be like taking the sun away from the solar system. The family fell apart totally."

Despite this trauma -- or perhaps because of it -- Tony's memories of his mother are good ones.

"She knew right where her mind was, where her soul was," he says. "She had it together. She was really intelligent, and far ahead of her time as far as her beliefs and her actions. It had **to** be hard on her. What she got from people was, "Hey, you're not supposed **to** be doing this; you're supposed **to** be home with your family. You're not supposed **to** be **going to** school.' "

Tony vividly recalls a camping trip he took with his mother and older brother in the summer of 1964, the year before Viola died. They drove down **to** Tennessee, the state where Viola grew up, and spent several days, camping overnight in fields under the stars.

"She taught me a whole lot about life that time," Tony says. "It was like she was preparing us, it really was, because she was telling us things . . . One night we were sitting by a fire, and there were trees and the stars were just coming out.

"And she said, "You see around? This is your heritage, this is your true heritage, not what you see in the cities, not the pace that's kept in the cities, but here.' "

In February 1965, just a month before Viola died, Tony recalls, Detroit was blanketed by a heavy snowstorm. A few days afterward, for some inexplicable reason, a rose bloomed in the Liuzzos' backyard. Tony says his mother took a photo of the rose and wrote on the back of it: "This is typical of the love in the Liuzzo house."

The official version of Viola Liuzzo's death was the one that emerged from Gary Rowe's testimony: that Collie Leroy Wilkins had fired the fatal shot while Rowe had only pretended **to** fire. In this official version, Rowe is the hero, a man who was powerless **to** prevent the actual murder but who courageously testified against the other men in the car and sent them **to** prison.

That version remained unchallenged for 10 years. Then, in 1975, a U.S. Senate subcommittee began an inquiry into published charges that the FBI and CIA had engaged in widespread misconduct and abuses of power in their investigations of political activists during the 1960s.

In the course of those hearings, the Liuzzos and the rest of the country learned that Rowe had been an FBI informant inside the Ku Klux Klan since 1959; that he was suspected of involvement in numerous acts of violence against blacks and civil rights workers, including the savage beating of a group of Freedom Riders in Anniston, Ala., in 1961 and a church bombing that killed four black children in Birmingham, Ala., in 1963; and that he had by his own testimony reported "dozens of incidents of planned violence" against civil rights activists **to** the FBI but that the agency had acted **to** prevent only two of the incidents.

Moreover, they learned that Rowe had told his FBI superiors early in his career as an informer that he would be asked by fellow Klansmen **to** engage in acts of violence and that his superiors approved Rowe's participation as a necessary price for getting information about the Klan.

Finally, they learned that Rowe had telephoned his FBI control agent on the day of Viola Liuzzo's murder **to** report that he was **going** out that night with other Klansmen and that some sort of violence was planned. The agent instructed Rowe **to** go along and observe, Rowe testified. No mention was made of preventing violence.

After the shock of these disclosures wore off, Tom and Tony Liuzzo began poring over old newspaper clippings about their mother's death. They found what they considered **to** be factual discrepancies in the case and filed a request with the FBI under the federal Freedom of Information Act for all FBI documents pertaining **to** the incident.

After many months of jockeying, including a visit **to** the FBI in Washington and a tense face- **to** -face meeting with FBI Director William Webster in the offices of U.S. Sen. Donald Riegle, the Liuzzos began **to** receive the documents.

The documents provided an even ruder shock. They revealed that within hours of Liuzzo's death, then-FBI Director Hoover had initiated a campaign **to** smear the murdered woman's reputation, apparently because he did not want her **to** become a symbol of martyrdom for the civil rights movement, which Hoover feared and detested.

In a memorandum **to** four FBI subordinates, dated March 26, 1965, the day after Liuzzo's murder, Hoover described a conversation he had that morning with Attorney General Katzenbach: "I told the attorney general that the president asked if he should talk **to** the husband of the woman in Detroit who had died . . . I stated the man himself doesn't have too good a background and the woman had indications of needle marks in her arms where she had been taking dope; that she was sitting very, very close **to** the Negro (Moton) in the car; that it had the appearance of a necking party."

In another memo written later the same day, Hoover wrote: "I told the president I don't say the man (Mr. Liuzzo) has a bad character but he is well known as a Teamster strongarm man and on the woman's body we found numerous needle marks indicating she had been taking dope, although we can't say that definitely because she is dead."

Hoover's comments about needle marks apparently were based on an internal FBI memo from Special Agent Spencer H. Robb, also dated March 26, 1965. This memo quotes Dr. Paul Schoffertt, who performed the autopsy on Liuzzo, as saying: "A puncture mark was observed as though a needle was recently used in the arm of Mrs. Liuzzo."

But when Schoffertt testified at Wilkins' murder trial on May 3, 1965, and was asked if he had found any puncture marks in Liuzzo's arms, he replied: "No, I did not. There were some blue spots, but I could not detect any punctures in the spots, no." When asked if he had specifically checked for possible puncture marks, Schoffertt responded affirmatively.

The charges contained in Hoover's memo soon were passed on **to** the attorneys defending Liuzzo's accused killers, who related them **to** reporters covering the trial. The defense attorneys also obtained a confidential police intelligence report on the Liuzzo family that contained equally lurid allegations about the murdered woman's personal life. That report had been passed from a high Detroit Police Department official **to** the police commissioner of suburban Warren, who then sent it **to** Sheriff James Clark of Selma. Clark gave it **to** the Klansmen and their lawyers.

In December 1977, the Liuzzo family initiated a $2 million lawsuit against the federal goverment, claiming that the FBI had known Rowe and his companions were embarked on a mission of violence and had taken no steps **to** prevent it. They also charged that the FBI had withheld information from them about Rowe's status as a paid informant.

In March 1980, U.S. District Judge Charles Joiner rejected a government motion **to** dismiss the suit on grounds that the statute of limitations had expired. The case is now awaiting trial before Joiner in federal court.

Much of the work on the lawsuit was done by the Michigan chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union and ACLU lawyer Jack Novick of New York. But last month Tony Liuzzo, unhappy over the slow pace of the legal proceedings, decided **to** remove Novick from the case and turn it over **to** Traverse City attorney Dean Robb, who had worked on the case in its early stages. The ACLU has decided **to** reduce its role in the suit as a result.

Shortly after the Liuzzos sued the government, in early 1978, Wilkins and Thomas were released from their parole on their federal conviction (Eaton had since died). Almost immediately, the two men charged that Rowe had fired the shot that killed Liuzzo. They repeated that story **to** an **Alabama** grand jury, which indicted Rowe for the Liuzzo murder in September 1978.

Rowe, 48, who now resides in Georgia, maintained his innocence and fought his indictment through the courts, and a federal judge in 1980 permanently enjoined the State of **Alabama** from prosecuting him for the Liuzzo murder on the grounds that he had been denied a speedy trial. That ruling is now being reviewed by a federal appeals court.

Although Tom Liuzzo had the original idea of suing the government, Tony has carried the main burden of keeping the suit alive in recent years. Now 27, Tony lives with his wife, Suzanne, and their two boys, Shadrick, 7, and Joshua, 2, in a small rented house in Southfield, where he works as a school bus driver.

On a table in the living room, next **to** the couple's wedding picture, is a framed portrait of Viola Liuzzo -- the same photo that the news media transmitted around the world on the night she died. On the wall above it is a picture of Martin Luther King.

Since he has returned from this year's **Alabama** march, Tony has gotten involved in the activities of SCLC's Detroit chapter. He is talking of giving up his bus driving job and taking a full-time staff position with SCLC as director of voter education.

"We've been sitting idle for too long," he says. "With the present administration, with the changes in civil rights policy that he (President Reagan) is trying **to** bring about, we're **going** back **to** the '50s. And if we go back **to** the '50s, we're all in trouble, regardless of what color we are."

The most important issue at hand, Liuzzo believes, is renewal of the federal Voting Rights Act, the law that his mother's death helped bring about. The act is due **to** expire this year. The U.S. House has already passed renewal legislation that toughens several sections. The Reagan administration supports renewal, but opposes the tougher language. The Senate has yet **to** consider the measure.

Liuzzo says he's prepared **to** join a demonstration in Washington, if necessary, **to** ensure renewal.

The invitation **to** march in **Alabama** in February, he says, came from Leon Hall, the SCLC staffer who co-ordinated the demonstration. "I didn't have **to** blink an eye," Tony says. "My wife came home and I said, " **Babe** , **I'm going to Alabama** .' She was worried, but she said, "I know you've got **to** go.' I had **to** go."

Liuzzo arrived in **Alabama** on Sunday, Feb. 14, the day the marchers set out from Selma on their re-creation of the famous 1965 trek. They poured out of Brown's Chapel in Selma, just as they had 17 years earlier. They sang "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round," just as they had 17 years earlier. They reached the Edmund Pettus Bridge over the **Alabama** River and found state troopers waiting, just as they had been 17 years earlier.

But this time, instead of greeting them with clubs and teargas, the troopers blocked traffic and escorted them over the bridge.

For two more days Tony and about 100 others -- many of them veterans of '65 -- tramped along U.S.-80, escorted by troopers and a growing flock of reporters. They covered about 10 miles a day and then stopped at night in little crossroads towns such as White Hall and Hayneville for supper, a meeting in the local black church and some sleep.

On Tuesday, Feb. 16, they approached the spot near the Lowndesboro crossroads where Viola Liuzzo had died. Plans had been made **to** stop there and lay a wreath.

As they neared the spot, the marchers began singing the spiritual "Come By Here, My Lord, Come By Here." A few tears began **to** roll down Tony Liuzzo's cheeks. SCLC President Joseph Lowery and his wife, Evelyn, locked arms on either side of Tony and supported him as they marched along.

"Tony needs you, my Lord, come by here," they sang. "Tony needs you, my Lord, come by here."

The marchers reached the crest of the hill and saw a small contingent of comrades up ahead, waiting at the appointed spot with the wreath. Others began passing out palm fronds.

Now the song had changed. "We're walking on with Tony, we shall not be moved, we're walking on with Tony, we shall not be moved."

Later, Tony would talk about feeling, sensing his mother's presence as he neared that spot. "Her spirit was moving me," he said. "I thought I could feel her with me."

The marchers left the highway, descended into a drainage ditch -- the same ditch into which Viola Liuzzo's Oldsmobile rolled 17 years ago -- and climbed up the other side. Winter rains had turned the hillside into a sea of red mud. The marchers arrayed themselves around the wreath. Tony was sobbing unabashedly; many others were also.

"I wanted **to** keep it together," he said later. "But the closer I got, the less I could hold it together. When we got **to** the spot, it all came out."

First Lowery spoke. "Seventeen years ago a brave, gallant woman defied the traditions and chains of segregation and discrimination. She defied those who said white people ought not get involved. She knew that injustice anywhere was fatal **to** justice everywhere. Our presence here testifies that her light still shines.

Then the Rev. Eddie Armstrong of Selma: "We no longer have Martin Luther King, but we have Joseph Lowery. While Viola Liuzzo is no longer with us today, Tony is here **to** carry on her spirit."

Tony listened in soggy silence **to** the eulogies. Then he choked back his tears and said: "I hope you will understand that this is a difficult moment for me. But the spirit of my mother, of Dr. King and of other brave souls who died for freedom lives inside us today. We will pick up their tasks. It's up **to** us **to** say we shall all be free. We shall overcome some day."

There was a hushed moment. Then the marchers began singing softly the old civil rights anthem, "We Shall Overcome." As Tony pushed the wreath into the soft ground, others dropped crosses made of the palm fronds around it. "Not in vain . . . not in vain," murmured one man.

For several moments they stood silently with bowed heads as a soft rain began **to** fall. Then Lowery called his troops back **to** order with the march's unofficial battle cry: "Fired up . . . I cain't take no more."

Within moments the marchers were back on the highway, heading toward Montgomery. A marcher with a bullhorn began another chant: "Pick 'em up and put 'em down . . . You know we are freedom bound . . . You know those hills are mighty steep . . . They put blisters on my feet."

Said Tony later: "From that point on I felt rejuvenated. I could have walked a hundred miles."

Tony Liuzzo's long journey had come **to** an end.

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Caption: Photo WILLIAM ARCHIE

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