

The Making of a

The day after three civil rights activists disappeared in Mississippi, Patricia Vail '63 wrote her parents from Oxford, Ohio, expressing her fears as she prepared to join other activists in the deeply racist state.

"We are not safe," Vail, then 22, wrote June 22, 1964, in a letter to her parents and now part of a collection at the C. Elizabeth Boyd '33 Archives. "Like everyone else involved, I realize that I could be killed this summer. I've known this all along. ... In the end I decided that this is a cause that I'm willing to die for."

The Mississippi Summer Project, known as Freedom Summer, was organized by a coalition of civil rights organizations that brought young, idealistic college-age students to Mississippi to register black voters and set up Freedom Schools to teach young children about black history and good citizenship. Organizers hoped that Northern white students working for civil rights would draw national attention to the extreme brutality and oppression suffered by the black community in Mississippi.

CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST

Patricia Vail '63 Put Her Life and Liberty on the Line for Others

By Amy Ensley



Images of 1963: investigators at the scene, left, of the car used by the three missing civil rights activists; young voting rights activists.

During the Project's first week, three civil rights workers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, disappeared. Schwerner, at 24, was an experienced organizer. Chaney, 21, was a Freedom Rider from Meridian, Mississippi, and Goodman, 20, was a college student from New York. FBI agents found their bodies 44 days later. For decades, black civil rights workers had routinely disappeared or been murdered in the South. What captured the nation's attention in this case was that two of the men were white.

Despite the known risks and dangers, nearly 1,000 white, middle-class college students volunteered to work to improve the lives of black citizens in Mississippi in the summer of 1964. For Vail, of Shaker Heights, Ohio, a newly burgeoning political awareness and the call of public service by President John F. Kennedy, along with her courageous spirit and indignation at injustice and cruelty, resulted in her joining the Mississippi Summer Project.

"So many students in the wake of [President John F.] Kennedy's killing ... wanted to get involved," Vail said in a recent phone interview in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Freedom Summer.

A PASSAGE TO ACTIVISM

Vail was from a fairly conservative, close-knit, lively family that included her mother, Gladys Conner Vail, a 1937 graduate of Wilson College; her father, an executive with

U.S. Steel; and two younger brothers. Vail followed her mother's path to Wilson College.

The environment at Wilson when Vail arrived in the fall of 1959 was that of a paternalistic, conservative women's college. Chapel was required, students had curfews and had to sign out when leaving campus. Mixers were still being organized to meet boys from other colleges and Wilson had just graduated its first black student.

Vail spent her junior year from 1961 to 1962 abroad in France, then in the midst of Algeria's war for independence. French young people were highly engaged politically. Living in France during that time had an enormous impact on her, she said. "It was liberating living in someone else's country," she said. "It was their problems and I was just an observer. There were police demonstrations ... bombs going off. You always had to have your passport on you if you had to escape. It was an entirely different milieu than Chambersburg."

French students and their parents were similarly intrigued by the civil rights protests in America. *The International Herald Tribune* printed photos of sit-ins and the Freedom Riders—civil rights activists who rode interstate buses in mixed racial groups through the South to challenge local laws that enforced segregation. French college students questioned Vail about the racism and increasing violence in America. She was embarrassed that she didn't know much about it. "I had never paid any attention,"

she said. "It was a real eye-opener." Shortly after the vote to liberate Algeria, Vail returned to Wilson College, with all of its rules and regulations. "After being out and about by yourself in a European city, it was hard to re-acclimate when you had had that much freedom."

RETURN TO WILSON

As Vail arrived back at Wilson for her senior year, her classmates also were becoming more politically aware. Vail's roommate, Mary McGroarty '64, was a member of Students for a Democratic Society and had recently returned from the national meeting. She and Vail tried unsuccessfully to convince the Wilson student body to establish a chapter of the National Students Association at a Wilson College Government Association meeting, but there was concern at Wilson that the National Students Association was a Communist front.

After graduation, Vail did what many college-educated women did in the early 1960s—she went to secretarial school. "It was considered the responsible thing to do," she said. "I was dating a young man who was going to Harvard Law School. It never occurred to me that I should go to Harvard Law, but I did think I could be a secretary there." By the end of the summer, Vail worked for two Harvard law professors.

While in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Vail and two other Wilson alumnae—Georgette Ioup '63, and Judy Corsen Coker '63—

formed a band of like-minded, civic-oriented friends. Together they were involved with the Cambridge chapter of Students for a Democratic Society. Vail also began to tutor underprivileged junior high school girls from Roxbury as a member of the National Student Movement.

Her work as a tutor occurred at the height of the virulent anti-busing hysteria in Boston's public schools, led by Louise Day Hicks, chairwoman of the Boston Public Schools system. Hicks vehemently denied that black children in Boston received an inferior education to white children. Vail saw the situation differently.

In a letter home, Vail wrote, "Louise Day Hicks, the leading light on the Boston School Committee, has been making a real ass of herself all over town. After working with NSM [National Student Movement], it makes us wonder which 'culturally deprived children' these are who are receiving 'even more attention than the average Boston schoolchild.' They are such blatant lies, at least as far as our experience has shown, that it is incomprehensible to me how the Committee can be so blind. This is really an exciting time to live, n'est-ce pas? If only it will all end in at least a somewhat better world."

Then, Vail said, the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy changed everything.

'THEY'RE DEAD'

Vail compared the impact of Kennedy's assassination to 9/11 for this generation. "It raised all the questions that were starting to simmer. What does it mean for the future?" she said. She and her friends got more involved with SDS, as did many young people in the wake of Kennedy's assassination. "We tried to attend everything. Judy, Georgette and I went to a number of these meetings in which people from Mississippi would speak. For people who had just a taste of politics, it was a real education. We were aghast at what was going on in

Mississippi. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee decided in early 1964 to organize the Mississippi Summer Project and many Harvard students in SDS decided to go."

In a letter to her family in March 1964, Vail wrote, "I know you've always been a bit concerned about my liberal but slightly foolish, irrational ideas. I used to laugh too until I discovered that the situation in this great democracy is no laughing matter. It is tragic and appalling. It's frightening. ... Our generation is gradually becoming reluctant to accept your world. ... There is a new society in the offing for the United States—since it will be my society as much as anyone else's I want to have a hand in shaping it. The 100 year moratorium is over—and I for one refuse to be a party to any attempt to draw it out still longer."

And with that, Vail announced her plans to spend the summer living with black families in Mississippi and registering black voters.

On May 23, 1964, Vail attended an all-day orientation for volunteers in Boston. She wrote to her parents, "The point they most emphasized over and over again was the fact that one of the only things which will keep us all safe (relatively) this summer is vast and continuous publicity of what we are doing. It is one of the few things which can prevent the Mississippi police et al. from doing as they wish, since when national attention is focused upon them they must tread more lightly. ... In the meantime I am sewing little 'care packets' into my skirts so that if I have to go to jail I will be prepared. ... Hopefully I won't go to jail, but just in case I do, would you be willing to post my bond? I seem to be getting you into something which you really didn't want to be a part of. I am proud to say, however, that

I owe most of the way I feel about things of this sort to you both."

During the middle of June, volunteers for Freedom Summer spent a week at

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They're dead.
They're not
going to be
found alive.'"*

— PATRICIA VAIL '63

Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, training in non-violent protest and voter registration techniques, as well as rules for survival in the segregated South. "The organizers had no illusion about the potential for violence," Vail said. "We really practiced lying on the ground and protecting our head."

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

August 10, 1964

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Vail:

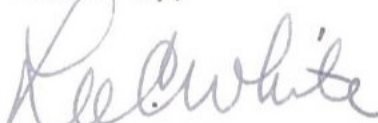
The President has asked me to reply to your message regarding the Mississippi summer project generally and indicating your special interest.

As I am sure you know, the President has been in direct communication with Governor Johnson of Mississippi, dispatched Allen Dulles to meet with the Governor, directed that additional FBI agents be brought into the State, sent Mr. J. Edgar Hoover to open the new FBI office in Jackson, Mississippi, and instructed the Secretary of Defense to make available personnel and equipment in connection with the search for the three boys. Efforts to apprehend those responsible for this tragic crime are being intensified.

Please be assured that the situation in Mississippi is receiving the continuous attention of the top officials of the Justice Department and that the FBI's efforts have not been relaxed.

Your own obvious concern is appreciated.

Sincerely,



Lee C. White
Associate Counsel
to the President

Mr. and Mrs. J. H. Vail
1808 Tyhura Lane
Bridgeville, Pennsylvania

A letter to the Vails from the White House.

Vail arrived on June 21 for the training. That night, she waited to use the phone to call her parents. Another woman was already using it. "Rita Schwerner [wife of Michael Schwerner] was on the phone, obviously upset," Vail recalled. "She hung up and said, 'Well, they're missing. You know what that means. They're dead. They're not going to be found alive.'"

The next day, June 22, Vail wrote the letter to her parents that she had safely arrived in Oxford, Ohio, for the training and the first week's group had arrived safely in Mississippi for their work. "Then came the blow—the summer project's first casualties," Vail wrote them. "Three men had just arrived in Meridian (the 'safe,' relatively speaking, part of Miss.) and had immediately set out to investigate the ruin of a Negro church which was burned last week. ... At any rate, the FBI and Justice Dept. officials on the spot have refused to investigate the case."

"This lack of cooperation on the part of federal officials may unfortunately set a precedent for the summer—i.e., the local officials seem to feel ... that they can get away with murder (literally)," she wrote. "At the moment there is evidently nothing at all in the way of protection between us and the ruthlessness ... of Miss. officials."

AN 'INCOMPREHENSIBLE EVIL'

Official White House recordings of a phone conversation on June 23 between President Lyndon Johnson and U.S. Sen. James Eastland of Mississippi reveal the extent to which Southern officials misled everyone about the true nature of the violence in the segregated South.

Johnson: "Jim, we got three kids missing down there. What can we do about it?"

Eastland: "Well, I don't know. I don't believe there's three missing. I believe it's a publicity stunt."

Johnson: "... several weeks ago, I asked them [the FBI] to anticipate the problem that would come from this ..."

Eastland: "Well, that's all right. Now I'm gonna tell you why I don't think there's a damn thing to it. There's no Ku Klux Klan in that part of



15 People
 Were ARRESTED for
 CROSSING A Street IN
 Greenville
 WHAT ARE YOU GOING
 TO DO ABOUT IT?
 MASS. Meeting
 FRIENDSHIP BAPTIST
 Church, North Street
 Tonight: Wed. March 24, 1965
 Time: 8:00 P.M.
 Stamp OUT INJUSTICE
 IN Greenville!!!

Photos, from left. President Lyndon B. Johnson meets with civil rights leaders Martin Luther King Jr. and Whitney Young in the Oval Office in 1964; Patricia Vail's activism was influenced by her trip overseas; a sign of the times.

Mississippi. Not a Citizen's Council in that area. There's no organized White Man in that area. Now if it had happened in other areas, I would, uh, pay more attention to it. ... I don't think there's anything to it."

Immediately upon hanging up, Johnson received a call from FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover.

Hoover: "I wanted to let you know we found the car."

Johnson: "Yeah?"

Hoover: "Now this is not known, nobody knows this at all, but the car was burned, and we do not know yet whether any bodies are in the car because of the intense heat ... but I did want you to know that apparently what's happened. These men have been killed."

Johnson: "Well now, what would make you think they'd been killed?"

Hoover: "Because of the fact that it's the same car that they were in ... on the other hand they may have been taken out and killed on the outside."

...

Johnson: "Or maybe kidnapped and locked up."

Hoover: "Well, I would doubt whether those people down there would even give them that much of a break."

A June 25, 1964, article in Ohio's *Dayton Daily News* reported on the disappearances and interviewed volunteers from week two of the training, including Vail. The article read: "Iron determination and a feeling of deep personal involvement have swept civil rights workers here after the disappearance in Mississippi of three of their fellow workers. Pat Vail said, 'As for convictions, it has probably made them stronger. And by bits and snatches I am starting to realize the vastness of this—and the incomprehensible evil of all of it.'"

The next day, Vail wrote to her family of the group's plans to leave the following morning. "Please say a prayer for all of us," Vail wrote. "My stomach feels as though it's in my shoes and my heart in my throat."

The bus that Vail and the other volunteers rode made a stop at the Memphis, Tennessee, bus station. Men with guns and dogs greeted them. Vail and her seatmate talked about how they would one day tell their children about what they did here. "This was our first experience with white bathrooms and 'colored' bathrooms," she said. "Visually, it was a shock. My God, this was real. People really do this. Little by little the reality kept washing over us. What am I doing? I must be out of my mind."

THE MISSISSIPPI SUMMER

During her first week in Mississippi, Vail described her situation to her parents in a

letter: "Have started to get used to being stared at and now carry about a notebook to take down descriptions of suspicious looking vehicles. Never walk out a door without surveying the streets and sidewalks first, and always have one person who practically walks backward so as to check for 'snipers' from behind."

"It became more clear that we were there as a foil, as a way to draw attention to the problem," Vail said. "People were not paying attention to the black community as it was living through this. Having middle class students being willing to commit to it brought attention."

Vail realized the attention and worry she felt was part of the never-ending experience of blacks in the South. "The black community was just so welcoming and so willing to take risks," she said. "They were running the risk of being beaten up, losing their jobs and their homes. How could I not be as brave as they were? The violence never ended. You learned how to be cautious and deal with it. You can't stay in that hysteria and accomplish anything."

She moved a half dozen times that summer, from one black family to another. "You would live with a family for a few weeks and they would be threatened and you would have to move on," she said. "At one home, three of us shared a bed. You tried to sleep without moving, it was so hot. There was nothing easy about it for anyone."