

Freedom Riders mark 40th anniversary of bus trip

Candace Chellew - Wires CNN

WASHINGTON (CNN) -- It's been 40 years since 13 civil rights advocates risked their lives trying to make a bus trip to test a new desegregation law. Thursday, a series of events to mark what came to be known as the "Freedom Ride" begins.

Rep. John Lewis, D.-GA, took part in the first "Freedom Ride" on May 4, 1961. The trip, which began in Washington, D.C. bound for New Orleans, was intended to test the Supreme Court's ruling a year earlier that declared segregation in interstate bus and rail stations unconstitutional.

The rides were met with angry resistance by many white people. The violence that ensued drew the nation's attention to the plight of Southern blacks.

"It was very violent," Lewis recalled in an interview with CNN. "It was 13 of us on the original ride, seven whites and six blacks. The bus was burned in Anniston, Ala. We were beaten in Birmingham and later met by an angry mob in Montgomery where I was hit in the head with a wooden crate. I thought I was going to die. I was left lying at the Greyhound bus station in Montgomery, unconscious."

Lewis said many of the participants didn't know if they'd make it back from the trip alive.

"Many of us as students and young people wrote our wills and signed statements because it was a very dangerous mission," Lewis said.

Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta will kick off the observance of the anniversary with a news conference in Washington. The celebration concludes Saturday with a re-enactment of a freedom ride from Atlanta to Montgomery, Ala.

In the original trip, the thirteen never made it to their intended destination of New Orleans after they were all sentenced to 60 days in jail in Mississippi. The idea of the rides caught on, however, and by November 1961, the Interstate Commerce Commission issued rules prohibiting segregated transportation facilities.

May 10, 2001 8:40 a.m. ET