

# The Man Who ESCAPED THE CROSS

BY JAMES M. LAWSON JR.



**H**IS ESCAPE WAS quite accidental, even as the experience of the cross was swiftly, without warning, thrust upon him; so the escape occurred again not by his own choosing but because he accepted the cross which God chose not to complete.

Charles Billups is a tall, slender, brown-skinned man. He spent 7½ years in the navy in both World War II and the Korean War as a gunner's mate. He carries the scars of his many battles: a steel plate in his head; plastic surgery to repair the damage done to his face; long, criss-cross scars along his abdomen and pelvic areas. At one time both his legs were broken in combat.

But he has also been a quiet, unassuming warrior for equal rights. He is one of the charter members of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, which is led by Fred Shuttlesworth. He was in both parties of people who tested bus segregation there, thus courting arrest. When the police commissioner of Birmingham first began to send plainclothesmen to the mass meetings, it was Billups, a Baptist minister, who refused entrance to them and was the next day arrested for interfering with officers. He has been and is one of the most committed and active warriors of nonviolence in Birmingham. Perhaps this is to be expected, since he has known the futility of violence.

On April 10, 1959, Billups, along with

two working companions, was returning home in Birmingham from his work at the Hayes Aircraft Company.

At one A.M. the KKK stopped the pick-up truck. Their strategy worked perfectly. As the truck picked its way through the narrow streets of a white housing project, a car ahead barricaded their passage. Hooded men came from all directions to accost the three workers and drag them from the seat. They came, knowing who they wanted. For finding that they had Billups, they immediately indicated that the other two Negroes were rather unimportant. But all three were blindfolded and shoved into separate vehicles. As the captives were prodded towards the automobiles one of the hoods remarked, "It looks as though we got a good catch tonight."

Blindfolded and roughly held on the back seat floor of a car, being taken to an unknown rendezvous, Billups recalls a period of fearful wrestling with God. He did not want to be hurt or killed. Thoughts of his young family flooded him with a desire to protect them from pain and see the three children grow to maturity. The floorboards became a Gethsemane as Billups prayed and surrendered himself wholly to the will of God. He felt afresh the impact of faith in God's knowledge about what was best. He was more than con-

vinced that God had the power to deliver him, if that was God's will. He was also quite convinced that if his death was imminent, God knew best how to bring good purposes out of even that—"God won't make a mistake." He recollected the many times in the past when under duress and suffering, he knew the love and power of God. By the time the auto reached its destination Billups was literally overwhelmed by that love and power. He was more than ready to live, but he was likewise more than ready to die. He knew that no matter what, all things would work for good. With a voluntary, "Thy will be done," he left everything in the hands of God.

### The Test of Faith

The blindfold was stripped off in a forest area. He then saw that the Klan had also brought along his two companions. But they were all kept apart, for he was after all the special guest. Guarded by knives and guns he was stumbled to a tree, and tied with his face rubbing the bark and his wrists bound about the tree. Shortly the "prosecutor" arrived and with henchmen gathered about their victim. The prosecutor did all the talking directly to Billups: "We want information about the movement and other information. When you lie, we'll beat you."

As one accoster ripped the clothes from the captive, the long period of beating and interrogation began. The first question concerned the parks the Alabama Christian movement planned to integrate.

"I don't know. Guess they'll sue all the parks of Alabama."

"This is a smart nigger. Give him five licks."

He was next asked about nigger Gwen (the treasurer of the Movement), about the secret meetings held in Gwen's home. Each time, Billups said, "Mr. Gwen," they furiously strapped him, saying, "It's not Mr. Gwen, but nigger Gwen." Accustomed to saying Mr. Gwen, the captive suffered the psychotic rage of his tormentors.

There were many questions and much beating with what seemed to be a thick leather strap . . . for they thought he lied often . . . the questions were really unimportant.

Eventually Billups remarked, "You ought to be ashamed for beating a minister of God."

Prosecutor: "Give him ten licks. Go get something to beat this nigger with."

So they brought a chain. By this time Billups was completely numb from the pain—his back and limbs were dead—so he mercifully hardly felt the chain, but could feel the warm blood running about his body.

Prosecutor: "You a minister of what?"

Billups: "A minister of God."

Prosecutor: "Go get something to beat this nigger with."

Thus to the chain was added the touch of thorn bushes which left their thorns embedded in the chain wounds. Different Klansmen competed to see who could slam Billups the hardest.

Prosecutor: "A minister of who?"

Billups: "A minister of God."

The chaining with the thorns added continued.

Up to this time, Billups had constrained himself from crying out. Now he decided to cry out . . . the heavy beatings stopped.

Prosecutor: "A minister of who?"

Billups: "A minister of Jesus."

Prosecutor: "Oh, you're a minister of Jesus." And he moved to another question. (Billups wondered if they even knew the relationship between Jesus and God.)

This became the pattern of the torture. He was interrogated about the Movement, Fred Shuttlesworth, and Nelson Smith (vice-president of the Movement). Since they found an Abraham Lincoln Republican Club membership card in his wallet, he was asked if this was a communist group. His negative reply brought further reprisals.

On and on it went:

"Why did you go to school?"

"Why did you ride the bus integrated?"

"Why not ride with the colored?"

Again Billups, still conscious, though numb, decided to begin to groan . . . the beatings seemed to let up somewhat.

Tiring of their sport, the prosecutors began to say: "Let's kill nigger Billups. Let's vote." The vote was 6-3 in favor of death.

"Nigger do you want to pray?"

"Yes. Lord, forgive these men, bless

them, bless their families, bless. . . ."

"Nigger, stop that praying." And the chain began to swing again.

But now dissension arose. For some conscience protested, "A man has the right to pray in his own way." And the prosecutor intervened to instruct Billups what he should pray.

With the noose about his neck, he was asked by the prosecutor: "What can you tell us to save your life?"

Billups: "What do you mean . . . tell you?"

Prosecutor: "If we let you go, will you get out of town?"

Billups: "Yes."

Prosecutor: "Will you get out of town by two P.M.?"

Billups: "Yes."

The prosecutor walked through the trees to the other two captives. Deciding that they were only the victims of circumstance, he spared them. It was Billups they wanted and it was Billups they punished for the anguish and hatred of their own sin.

During this lull, Billups still bound to the tree, had a shot gun in the small of his back and a Bowie knife at his throat. One of the men kept picking at the open wounds with a sharp point. They kept talking wildly, "Don't move nigger. Don't you run, Believe me, I'll kill you." Billups had to smile at the ignorance and terror revealed. In spite of the beating, the bloody body, he sensed no anger toward these men.

When the prosecutor returned, the men were still talking about killing the nigger since the vote was taken. But the prosecutor untied him. He was pushed to the wet ground, eventually driven out on a highway and dumped.

Only on one occasion did Billups become wholly indignant at man's narrow-mindedness. Shortly after reaching the highway, dirty, bloody, numb, beginning to feel the shock and pain done to his body, he was picked up by a patrol car. After wrangling with them about his need for medical attention, he was driven to a hospital (where later the doctor refused to treat him). As Billups got out of the police car, the driver came around, exclaiming, "Wait a minute, change that story about white men beating

you like that. No white men would beat you like that." Billups flared and replied, "Look here, I know who beat me."

There is one further unusual incident which Birmingham ponders over. The doctors of another hospital not only admitted him, but carefully took out all the dirt and thorns. They also thoroughly X-rayed his body to find a fractured vertebra which required surgical attention. He was rested for a day in preparation for the surgery. Again Billups experienced an intense period of relatedness to a loving Father. His response was again to submit to that all-knowing Will. When the next X-rays were taken, anticipating surgery, the fracture was not to be found. He further bewildered the doctors by requiring no shots for what was supposed to be intense pain.

### The Armor of God

Throughout this experience, Billups recalls only one stage of fright. Returning from the hospital, friends of the Movement set nightly guards about his home. The first night he was unable to sleep. He was filled with terror. He knew that he had taken himself out of the hands of God to place himself in the hands of men who were not able to keep him. This was a denial of faith in God. So the next night when the guards returned he asked them to go home, that he would trust God to take care of him.

Weeks after recuperating, with the marks of the chains added to his body, Billups still sensed no hostility towards these men of the Klan. In speaking to members of the movement, he reaffirmed his belief that only through Christian nonviolence could lasting peace be achieved. He told his fellow Negroes that in fighting wrong they profess a belief in God, but keep their forty-fives in their back pockets—so that they actually believed in the forty-five and not in God. Only if the Negro is strong enough to love and forgive, while pressing on for a new society, will the end to segregation and racial hatred arrive. And then as if to clinch his concern, Charles Billups became a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

A member whose encounter with the Cross illuminates the power of nonviolence.