**Deacons for Defense and Justice**

In 1964, in Jonesboro, Louisiana, black students picketing the local high school were confronted by hostile police and fire trucks with hoses. A car of four black men emerged and in view of the police calmly loaded their shotguns. The police ordered the fire truck to withdraw. This was the first time in the twentieth century, as author Lance Hill observes, "an armed black organization had successfully used weapons go defend a lawful protest against an attack by law enforcement." Defying the nonviolence policy of the mainstream civil rights movement, an armed self-defense organization--the Deacons for Defense and Justice—was formed to protect civil rights movement workers from vigilante and police violence.

Robert Hicks would play a key part in the formation of the Bogalusa chapter of the Deacons for Defense and Justice. Someone had called to say the Ku Klux Klan was coming to bomb his house. The police said there was nothing they could do. It was the night of Feb. 1, 1965, in Bogalusa, Louisina. The Klan was furious that Mr. Hicks, a black paper mill worker, was putting up two white civil rights workers in his home. It was just six months after three young civil rights workers had been murdered in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Mr. Hicks and his wife, Valeria, made some phone calls. They found neighbors to take in their children, and they reached out to friends for protection. Soon, armed black men materialized. Nothing happened.

The Hicks family had opened their home to white civil rights workers and Congress of Racial Equality head James Farmer. Because of that, the family was targeted by the Ku Klux Klan. Hicks’ calls for help motivated the formation of the Bogalusa chapter of the Deacons for Defense and Justice, an armed band of African-American men who stood guard at the Hicks' home and protected civil rights workers in the city.

Mr. Hicks, who was born in Mississippi and moved to Bogalusa at a young age, was a member of the local NAACP and the Bogalusa Voter and Civic League. He would be involved in lawsuits resulted in the desegregation of Bogalusa's public schools and the prohibition of unfair hiring tests and seniority systems at the local paper mill. Mr. Hicks also filed a landmark lawsuit against the city and police department of Bogalusa, obtaining a federal court order requiring the police to protect protest marchers, and winning a lawsuit that overturned government & police officials' refusals to allow protest marches.

With their largest and most famous chapter at the center of a bloody campaign in the Ku Klux Klan stronghold of Bogalusa, Louisiana, the Deacons for Defense and Justice became a popular symbol of the growing frustration with Martin Luther King Jr.'s nonviolent strategy and a rallying point for a militant working-class movement in the South.

The Deacons had a relationship with other civil rights groups that advocated and practiced non-violence: the willingness of the Deacons to provide low-key armed guards facilitated the ability of groups such as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) to stay, at least formally, within their own parameters of non-violence. Although many local chapters felt it was necessary to maintain a level of security by either practicing self-defense as some CORE, SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), and NAACP local chapters did, the national level of all these organizations still maintained the idea of non-violence to achieve civil rights. Nonetheless, in some cases, the Deacons’ willingness to respond to violence with violence, led to tension between the Deacons and the nonviolent civil rights workers whom they sought to protect.

Organizations like SNCC, CORE, and SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) all had major roles in exposing the brutal tactics that were being used against Black people in America, particularly to Southern Blacks. This was seen as crucial to getting legislation passed that would protect African-Americans from this oppression and help develop their status of equality in America.

However, according to Lance Hill, author of, The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement, "the hard truth is that these organizations produced few victories in their local projects in the Deep South—if success is measured by the ability to force changes in local government policy and create self-governing and sustainable local organizations that could survive when the national organizations departed...The Deacons’ campaigns frequently resulted in substantial and unprecedented victories at the local level, producing real power and self-sustaining organizations." According to Hill, this is the true resistance that enforced civil rights in areas of the Deep South. Many times it was local (armed) communities that laid the foundation of equal opportunities for African-Americans. National organizations played their role of exposing the problems but it was local organizations and individuals who implemented these rights and were not fearful of reactionary Whites who wanted to keep segregation alive. Without these local organizations pushing for their rights, and many times, using self-defense tactics, not much would have changed (according to scholars like Hill).

By 1968, the Deacons had pretty much vanished. In time they were “hardly a footnote in most books on the civil rights movement,” Mr. Hill said. He attributed this to a “mythology” that the rights movement was always nonviolent. Robert Hicks’ wife said she was glad it was not. “I became very proud of black men,” she said. “They didn’t bow down and scratch their heads. They stood up like men.”