

FBI informer, implicated in Klan killings, dead at 64

David Walsh
7 October 1998

Gary T. Rowe, an FBI informer in the Ku Klux Klan implicated in the murder of civil rights workers and blacks in the 1960s, has died in Savannah, Georgia at the age of 64. A television crew doing research on the FBI and the Klan discovered last week that Rowe died in May. He had lived under an assumed name in the federal witness protection program for more than 30 years.

Rowe's career constitutes a damning indictment of the role played by the FBI in some of the most heinous crimes of the civil rights era and points to the bureau's overall hostility, contrary to official mythology (reinforced by such films as *Mississippi Burning*), to the struggle against segregation over the course of many years.

Rowe first came to the public eye following the murder of Viola Liuzzo, the 39-year-old wife of a Detroit Teamsters official and mother of four, on a stretch of Alabama highway on March 25, 1965. Liuzzo had traveled to Alabama to help in the Selma-to-Montgomery civil rights march. Within 24 hours of the murder, four men had been arrested, including Rowe. When he was not indicted, he was revealed as an FBI informer. Rowe admitted to being in the car with the other men when they pulled alongside Liuzzo's car and opened fire on the unarmed woman, but asserted that he had only pretended to shoot.

The first trial of the three killers named by Rowe ended in a hung jury; the second in an acquittal. The three Klansmen were finally convicted in a third trial on charges of violating Liuzzo's civil rights and sentenced to 10 years in prison each. A lawsuit filed by the Liuzzo family forced the FBI to release documents in 1978 exposing attempts by bureau director J. Edgar Hoover to suppress the investigation into the Liuzzo killing. In the aftermath of the murder the FBI tried to

discredit the murdered woman, circulating stories that she was a drug user, had mental problems, was unfaithful to her husband and was 'necking' with a black man at the time of her death.

In his autobiography Rowe asserted that he had first been approached in 1960 by an FBI agent and urged to join the Klan and report on its activities. FBI records have revealed that Rowe received from \$20 to \$300 a month as an informer from 1960 to 1965.

Rowe was implicated or suspected of involvement in a series of crimes while working for the FBI. He admitted to taking part in the violent assault on Freedom Riders at the Birmingham, Alabama bus station in 1961. Birmingham police had made an arrangement with local Klansmen to give them 15 minutes in which they could beat the civil rights activists with impunity. FBI documents, later brought to light under the Freedom of Information Act, showed that bureau agents had regularly supplied intelligence reports on the progress of the Freedom Riders to two members of the Birmingham Police Department known to be leading Klan members.

Rowe, described by Hoover as the best undercover agent 'we've ever seen,' also claimed that he shot and killed an unidentified black man in a riot in Birmingham in 1963, and that federal authorities had told him to keep quiet about it.

A Justice Department investigation in 1980 admitted that the FBI had known about and covered up Rowe's participation in nonlethal attacks on blacks. Investigators claimed that they found no evidence to support the charge, circulated for years, that Rowe had failed a lie detector test about his involvement in the infamous 1963 bombing of a Birmingham church that killed four little girls. Robert E. Chambliss, Rowe's superior in the Klan, was convicted of the crime in

1977.

Allegations were also raised that Rowe had been involved in the double-bombing of a black neighborhood in 1963 and the transporting of guns to Tuscaloosa at the time of Governor George Wallace's efforts to block the integration of the University of Alabama in June 1963.

The Liuzzo family's lawsuit charged that the FBI had been negligent and failed to protect civil rights workers. Dean Robb, the family's lawyer, called Rowe 'a hostile, violent, pugilistic unguided missile, a violence junkie.' A federal judge in Michigan, however, ruled in 1983 that no negligence had been proven. In a separate case that year the federal government was obliged to pay \$25,000 to James Peck, one of the Freedom Riders badly beaten at the Birmingham bus station.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact