

John Lewis gets award from VEP

By Gregg Jones

Staff Writer

For John Lewis, it must have seemed hundreds of years and millions of miles since that day in 1965 on the bridge at Selma, Ala.

He was at the vanguard of a civil rights march crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge on that day in 1965 when policemen wielding billy clubs fractured his skull and left him in a pool of his own blood.

But Thursday evening, Lewis, now an Atlanta city councilman, stood in tuxedo and black bow tie before 200 members of the Voter Education Project. They honored the veteran civil rights activist Thursday night with their highest accolade, the Martin Luther King Jr. Award, for his work in voter registration and education.

"It means a great deal to me, but this isn't so much an honor for me as it is for the thousands of people who have worked in the voter registration movement," Lewis said shortly before accepting the award.

Lewis spoke with optimism about the work in the areas of voter registration and conditions in the South. "I think we're on the way to a biracial democracy in the South," he said.

The award was the highlight of the annual Voter Education Project banquet, commemorating the organization's 21st anniversary.

Lewis was beaten unconscious four times and jailed on more than 40 occasions for his activities in civil rights and voter registration efforts. He was an early activist in the voter registration drive in the South and went on to serve as executive director of the Voter Education Project from 1970 to 1977.

In the last 21 years, said VEP Executive Director Geraldine Thompson, the organization has helped register 4 million blacks to vote across the South. The number of black elected officials in the South has gone from 72 in 1965 to nearly 3,000 now.