

Kent State Guardsmen Oral History Project

Interviewee: **Arthur Krummel**

Interviewer: **Dr. David Strittmatter**

Date of Interview: **04/01/2020**

Location of Interview: **Phone Call**

DS: This is David Strittmatter conducting a phone interview on April 1st, 2020, for the Kent State Guardsman Oral History Project. What is your name and where are you from?

AK: My name is Art Krummel and I'm from Akron, Ohio.

DS: And how long and in what capacity did you serve in the Ohio Army National Guard?

AK: I served six years as an infantryman and basically I was a specialist fourth class, sometimes sergeant, sometimes specialist. It just depended on my behaving.

DS: And what led you to join the Guard?

AK: Oh, I got a registered letter in the mail and my mom called me at work and said, "You got a registered letter in the mail." And so I thought "Oh, it's gonna be the Selective Service notifying me I'm drafted, so I'm gonna join the National Guard first." So, that's what I did. I went and picked up my letter and it was from an insurance company that was rebating a little bit of money 'cause my car insurance had changed.

DS: And where were you working at the time?

AK: At that particular time, I was working for a night newspaper subsidiary called Portage Newspaper Supply and then, subsequently, I became... I went to work in the art department of the *Akron Beacon Journal*.

DS: And looking back on your time in the Ohio National Guard, how do you view it?

AK: Well, you know, it was interesting. It was kinda fun, you remember the fun parts, you don't remember the unfun parts. But, the Guard unit I was in, we were activated for a couple of race riots and a significant one up in Cleveland [in 1966] where there was a lot of violence. And we were activated for... well, my memory of the Guard is mostly summer camps, playing cards, having beer and whiskey, and having fun.

DS: And how did you arrive to Kent, Ohio, in May of 1970?

AK: (3:02) Well, we were first activated, right at that particular time, to guard a convoy of trucks that was being driven out of Roadway. During the Trucker's Strike—Teamster Strike—there had been some violence, and so at Roadway Express, they had a convoy of trucks ready to be driven and they put supervisors and scab workers to drive those trucks out of the terminal and out onto the highway. So we guarded... we faced the striking teamsters and I noted at the time that they were scary looking 'cause they were grown men and we were just kids. But, they respected the uniform and I was happy that they did and the convoy went on its way and we had to sleep in the field under pup tents in the rain. We were pretty miserable and the next day, which I believe was Saturday [May 2nd], we went to a football field called the Rubber Bowl, which was for the University of Akron's football team, and we thought we were turning in our equipment to go home, but instead we were transferred up to the Kent campus Saturday, I believe. And then we were deployed Saturday evening at the bottom of Blanket Hill, and I placed that timing because

behind us the ROTC building that had been burned was still smoldering and little wisps of smoke were still coming up. So, we just, it was an insignificant confrontation, the kids were just, now and then, throwing rocks or something but, hell, they weren't even halfway to us. And, now and then, a tear gas grenade would be fired and that would come back toward us, so there was not a real big deal confrontation. So, anyway, later on that night, we'd moved the kids up off Blanket Hill and under the campus and then we formed up and there were some squads selected to do other things. My squad, which consisted of four people and myself, we were assigned to two roadblocks and I was squad leader and in charge of the two roadblocks. And, I noticed that during the roadblock there was some commotion, and I moved toward the roadblock where there was some trouble, now I was still probably fifty feet away from it because I needed to have observation on both roadblocks and I heard this exchange between the driver and my friend who was guarding the roadblock. The driver says, "I'm going in," and my friend says, "No, you're not, I can't let you go in. This road is closed and I am manning this roadblock." And so the man kept kinda nudging forward and my friend stubbornly stood in front of his car and staggered back as the man would nudge forward. Well, I had live ammunition, I was the only one in the squad issued live ammunition, and at that point I clicked the safety off my M1, if he had run over my friend, preparing to shoot at the driver or at the car. And, God forbid, his wife was in the car, I'm so glad I didn't have to shoot. Police spotted this commotion and drove down there with their lights on and arrested the man, who happened to be a professor, and he was drunk. So all in all, and that turned into pretty much nothing. We were then sent back to our tents and we slept the night. Then it was Sunday morning [May 3rd] and the kids and the Guard were, oh it was a nice day, sunny day, I had a lot of fun hanging out on campus in Jeeps and stuff and all the good looking girls were hanging around, you know, they liked uniforms. And all the kids, all the young men, they were all the same age, same socio-economic backgrounds, for the most part, and they were there for the same reasons we were—to avoid, for the most part, not entirely but, to avoid going to Vietnam. **(9:07)** The rest of that day, Sunday, passed without any significance in my mind. I rode around in a Jeep, around the perimeter of the campus, just kinda making sure no marchers were coming in, no marchers were going out. And then, Sunday night, what happened in between I don't remember, but Sunday night, were stationed as a skirmish line across Main Street and there was a big gang of protesters blocking the intersection on Main and Water, or whatever street it was, and then there was a riot order read to them and then we were commanded to move them off that intersection. And we did it kind of as a skirmish line, step, step, step, step. We had gas masks on, our bayonets were bared and we had them down into the, you know, kind of an attack mode, and some of the kids, who seemed to be just observers, were running back and forth like scared deer, not knowing what to do 'cause they didn't want to be identified particularly with the protesters. But, they saw these bayonets advancing towards them and they were dancing back and forth. This guy and girl, our age, were very scared and I caught his eye and kinda signaled to him and he came over and I stepped aside and let them get out of that predicament. So, then we moved the group up onto campus and we had to march up this hill. Rocks are flying downhill and one of my friends, the guy beside me, got conked with a rock. Rocks maybe the size of baseballs or larger. He fell down and somebody

apparently picked him up. I was gasping for air and I, every now and then, I'd take a break, open up my gas mask and take a big deep breath of tear gas. But tear gas, you know, it wasn't all that bad, didn't bother me. That was that, that was about the end of that confrontation, the kids moved onto campus, we were dispersed and went off, had guards set up around our camp, but were sleeping, I think, oh I forget now, I think it was by an athletic center that was since replaced—anyway, big field. Then, that was Sunday, then Monday morning [May 4th]. **(12:30)** Let's see, that was Sunday night, Monday morning, I was assigned, and my squad were assigned to the sanitation plant. I don't know what road it was on, but they feared there would be some sabotage and I think it was also the water purification or water supply plant and it was the Kent State, or Kent City utility. So we were sent to guard that, well, put two guys at the driveway and then three of us went up to the main kinda building and just lounged around and every few hours, two new guys would go down there. Being the sergeant, I didn't have to go down there. Anyway, pretty soon, we see this cop car coming up with its lights flashing, were going, "Oh, crap, what happened then?" And they told us—been a shooting on campus. Like, they didn't know, they said, "Some guardsmen were shot, some kids were shot. Get in the car, we gotta take you over to this auxiliary police station." So, we went over there and they said, 'Just guard this police station.' So, we just stood around there, found a Salvation Army canteen and had a sandwich and a hot chocolate, and it was a very interesting and eye opening experience. Police from every nearby community flooded into this station, which was just a makeshift, like, schoolhouse or a city building, and I'm sure they were flooding into other places. But, the guys that were coming in, they had personal weapons that were pretty scary looking. I mean, they had some pretty fancy looking sawed-off shotguns, pistol grip shotguns and they were in these beautiful cases. That was scary, I mean, to consider that these are the city officials. But, anyway, there wasn't anything much that happened there, but my unit forgot about us. So I said, 'Well, let's go back, let's go over here to this school and we'll just sleep here.' 'Oh, shouldn't we report back to the Company?' I said, "Ah, I'm not doing it, go ahead if you want." But I, 'cause I told ya, I wasn't really a stickler for that kinda regimentation. So, we stayed another day and finally, that was Tuesday, we wandered on back to our company and they wondered where we were but I told them we were guarding this auxiliary police station, jeez, that was important, and that was about it. **(16:00)** My personal feelings, my walkaway feelings on this. The shooting had occurred, I personally couldn't imagine shooting into a crowd of people without some real provocation. I don't think rocks, throwing, was truly worth shooting kids. I can't imagine shooting indiscriminately into a group. I would never condone that, but I don't hold the kids that did that particularly guilty because a lot of situations are very tense, very scary, and the kids, in numbers, could be very scary. And, of course, you say, well we didn't have significant training in those kind of situations. We were just kids! Who in the hell?... This is a big question I keep kicking around in my mind, what kind of an adult leadership, like [Ohio Governor] Jim Rhodes, who was running for reelection, what kind of leadership would stick a bunch of kids in the middle of a bunch of other kids and the other kids were mad at these other kids who happened to be in the National Guard and then give the one side real bullets? What kind of nut job would do that? But they did it. And the guys were tired, they had been involved in a teamster strike and rain and

all kinds of discomfort. So, it seemed almost like an inevitability that, setting up that scenario, what outcome could you expect? Jesus! Anyway, that's pretty much my testimony, my personal recollection of events.

DS: Do you recall if the National Guard issued any sort of instruction to its members in the days after the events?

AK: No, I don't remember any overall instructions, but I do remember, once we left to kind of congregate before official formation, "Who did it? Who shot? You shot? Did anybody here shoot?" We couldn't find out who did the shooting and it was pretty slammed down, there just wasn't a lot of information flowing, but I don't remember any official position statement from the Guard being distributed to the regular rank and file guardsmen, although it may have happened. I don't remember it.

DS: (19:27) How closely did you follow the investigation and trial of those indicted guardsmen?

AK: I didn't follow it at all and I don't think it was widely reported. If it was, having my own kind of connection, I didn't feel that they should be prosecuted so I didn't follow it closely. I'm not a big follower of news, even today. I try to ignore as much of this back and forth and fingering pointing. I've formed my own opinion from real events, I watch a fair amount of C-SPAN and collect my own information and I watch some of the... anyway. So that's my position, I didn't follow it close.

DS: In the fifty years since the events at Kent State, how have people reacted if they learned you were in Kent when all of this happened?

AK: (20:45) Well, it took me a long time to even say anything publicly. I think it was close to fifteen years, maybe more, before I said a word publicly about it. My wife and I happened to be down on OU Campus, she was giving a report on a completely different topic, maybe she was reporting, she was a reporter for the *Beacon*. She might have been there to report on something, whatever was going on, but it wasn't Kent, but we saw this conference and presentation in this auditorium so I said, "Let's go drop in there." My wife's event was not happening; we weren't in time crunch. So, we went in and I listened and the guy's presentation was pretty much straight nuts and bolts "The National Guard was evil," and all of the facts presented were only favoring the students. So I said, "Well, I'd like to speak up and say that I happened to be in the National Guard at that time and on that campus and I have these other parts of this that might illuminate. So I talked, much the way I do here, and finished and sat down and there wasn't a lot of reaction from people. A few police guys, a sheriff, and a couple others said thank you for speaking that or giving that position. I think that it's important to remember that there is another point of view and I had some support in that audience. And I've not been afraid to speak up since. But, like a lot of things, it's not easily defended and I would never try to defend what happened, but there is some things that are not said and I think what's not said is significant. I think that the stupid officials that let that happen hold way more responsibility than the guys who shot into a crowd. God, I can't imagine. Can't imagine. I don't know how to forgive them. I bet they never forgave themselves, but to be put into that position was really not fair. Not given the proper training and proper discipline, it just really wasn't right.

DS: (24:21) How often have historians or reporters, for example reached out to you to hear your-

AK: Not often. Not very often, I gave much this sort of interview with the Kent State archives and other than this, no one has really contacted me. I wrote a short description of the roadblock incident for the *Beacon Journal* for one of their commemorative issues, but it wasn't a long thing, it was maybe a few paragraphs. It won an award, by the way, but anyway, I'm not a writer, I'm an artist.

DS: Have you ever returned to the Kent State campus?

AK: Oh sure, I taught a little bit of graphics... informational graphics, reporting, and computer ec[onomics]. I think the class was called 'Macintosh in the Newsroom' and 'How Informational Graphics are Created'. It was a lot of fun. And I taught in buildings, I walked right past the sculpture that had bullet holes in it and the parking lot where some of the kids were wounded. Blanket Hill and plaques that are up there and the memorial and all the stuff. Yeah, I was there, I was all around that, but, it's history.

DS: Are you still in contact with any of the guardsmen you served with?

AK: Not many, a lot of them have died. Ya know, it's been fifty years and they had to be in their twenties, so they got to be tough, this old age is not for amateurs. But, I am friends with the guy who was in front of that car at the roadblock and I'm still his buddy and he's my friend. We been close friends for, we met in the National Guard when he first joined, and so that had to be [19]65 or [196]6, so since then he's been my friend. What is that, 70, 65, 50, hell, I can't think about it. Lotta years, fifty years, sixty years...

DS: Would you have any final comment, perhaps if there are any questions I did not ask you would like to speak to.

AK: No, I think my statement in regard to the insanity of the state, Jim Rhodes, and—I forget what they're called—the commanding officers of the National Guard, they were pretty crazy to issue live ammunition in that volatile situation to relatively untrained kids and expect a different outcome. I mean, they were simply not very careful in their thinking. But, I don't know of anything you didn't ask, I kinda just rambled on through it, I didn't leave anything unsaid or any question in my mind remains.