

Kent State Guardsmen Oral History Project

Interviewee: **Dale Antram**, Specialist-4, Company A, 1st Battalion, 145h Infantry Division

Interviewer: **Dr. David Strittmatter**

Date of Interview: **02/27/20**

Location of Interview: **Phone Call**

DS: This is David Strittmatter, history professor at Ohio Northern University. I'm conducting an interview here for the Kent State Oral History Project on February 27th, 2020. Question number one is, what is your name, and where are you from?

DA: My name is Dale Antram. I am currently in Jacksonville, Florida. I've been in this area for forty years—since July of 1969. It'll be 41 years this summer. I attended the College of Wooster. I finished there and I became a sportswriter at the *Akron Beacon Journal*. But before I went to the *Beacon Journal*, I enlisted in the Ohio National Guard at the company base there in Wooster, 145th Infantry. As we all know, we're gonna talk about May 4th, 1970. My career path went from sports writing at the *Beacon Journal* for about three and a half years, then I went into public relations at Firestone Tire in Akron. I was there for 10 years. I was hired by the PGA Tour, which was moving to Ponte Vedra, Florida. So that's when I came down here, in the summer of '69. I spent twenty-two years at the PGA Tour, I worked another nine years at Mercury Luggage here in town. I still play golf, although the arthritis is slowing that up. My activities in a typical week are I volunteer at the adjacent nearby Mayo Clinic here in Jacksonville. I spend two four-hour shifts there Monday afternoons and Friday mornings. I try to get some golf in either Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday. I'm still keeping up with my own yard work. And my wife Marilyn keeps me busy, as she is an artist, and a kind of accomplished one now. And she's involved with the Plein Air Painters of the First Coast, and a couple other art associations in the surrounded area. So I'm enjoying retirement.

DS: (3:05) (Laughs) Sounds like it. Boy, this is a half century ago here, but what lead you to join the Ohio National Guard?

DA: Well, in my last year of school, I had become a sports information guy for the College of Wooster. And I was also working part-time for the *Wooster Daily Record*, writing sports. So I pretty much had a good grip on what I wanted to do, which was to be a sports writer, or go into corporate public relations. In order to do that, I felt like I had, at that time, a good knowledge with a good bunch of people in the business around northern Ohio, and I just thought it would be best if I were to capitalize on those relationships, and step out of college into a decent job without a big gap of a couple of years in full-time military. I found out that I could join the Guard, spend basically four months in training, and come back to civilian life and not have as great a time period between my finishing of college and actually getting into a job in the field I thought I was destined for. And that is actually what happened.

DS: So, how long did you serve in the Guard, and in what capacity?

DA: Well, the initial training, it turned out to be about three and a half months. I went to basic training at Fort Knox, and from there, right into supply school, which was also at Fort Knox, which was fewer weeks than was expected. And I got discharged earlier, at about three and a half months. I knew Jack Patterson, the executive sports editor at the *Akron Beacon Journal*, from having met him at various sports events and functions around the region. And so I had written Jack a letter from Fort Knox, saying, "I'm gonna get out at such-and-such a date, do you have a job for me?" Then about five days later, they called me and said, "Antram, you're done. Go and get your discharge papers at 5:30 tomorrow morning." Which was about two weeks early. Unexpected. So Jack never had a chance to respond to me. I got through my discharge physical, jumped in the car, and I drove straight to Akron. I walked into the *Beacon Journal* and I found

Jack Patterson. I said “Jack, I wrote you a letter.” He said, “Oh god, what are you doing here? I just was going to write you back. Can you start Monday?” Which totally floored me, but I said yes. I go home to see my folks and change out these clothes, and I came back and found an apartment and went to work.

DS: (6:35) Looking back, how do you view your time in the Ohio National Guard?

DA: You know, it’s just something I did. It was a... from a National Guard perspective, the training was excellent. The supply school was not very challenging, and I happened to have been able to type. So, the supply school guys said, “Hey we have a job for you. Why don’t you become regular army, and you can have a career here teaching this class.” That’s not really what I had in mind, so I declined and went back to Wooster and reported back to my company. Also, as I said I went to the *Beacon Journal* and began my civilian life. The National Guard commitment was six years – basic training plus five and a half plus years and monthly drills and a two-week summer camp. You know, it was typical military stuff that was annoying at times, uh, challenging. It’s just something I did, and a lot of other people I know of course were in the same shoes and also served their country in that way. The company based in Wooster, happened to have a pretty busy cycle of active duty call ups. We had a lot of things happen, including 1970, which actually began with the Teamster strike about a week before Kent State erupted. The Teamsters had—I guess what was kind of a wildcat strike—early that year, that spring. It got a little violent. There were bricks and bowling balls and cement blocks and other things being dropped off of highway overpasses and causing havoc with other trucks and got some cars too. That was about a five or six-day period of activity that was worrisome, because the Teamsters had a tough reputation. We didn’t have any major incidents, but we were with state patrol and the sheriff’s folks, and it was kind of a combined force presence on the highways west and north of Akron. It was Saturday [May 2nd] that weekend, that the ROTC building Kent State was set aflame, there were riots in downtown Kent, we were called over there to help try to restore order.

DS: (9:49) What are your memories of arriving into Kent?

DA: Oh man. Tough to put a lot of fine details on things, fifty years hence. But I think we went to the... we pulled in and bivouacked at the old football practice field. We kind of set up camp, and then we were... I guess we went into downtown and pushed through the crowds and just trying to help restore order. It was... we were already tired, and when you’re on active duty, you’re... we were camping I think at the Akron Rubber Bowl for the Teamsters strike and it was just a continuation. You know, not ideal conditions. When we were, there had been a series of riots at other universities. So I think it became the thing to do is for there to be a riot at campus in order for it to be... the ‘in’ thing, the ‘in’ place to be. That was part of the feeling of frustration with it, that it was really not necessary. But we were called there, so we went.

DS: (11:48) On May 4th, the day of the shooting, I mean what do you remember from that day specifically?

DA: Well, let me give you a little bit more of my feelings about what transpired Saturday night and then into Sunday [May 3rd] and into Monday [May 4th]. It all, kind of sets the stage for me, and what I remember. Saturday night was rioting chaos, the fire, and it was a long night. Sunday, we slept in til ten, I don’t know, ten-thirty in the morning. And then Sunday was a pretty quiet, tranquil day. We ended up playing euchre with some of the students. It just happened. They were curious about who we were, where we were from, and so on. We ended up, somebody had some cards, and we ended up playing euchre. I think there were supposed to be some riots that night, I don’t have any recollections about that. But we did go on duty Sunday night, and we were on street corners, major intersections in Kent, with either police or sheriff’s deputies or state patrol. And we stopped some out-of-state cars. And part of the reason tensions ended up being so high the next day, were because we had—with the sheriff, or patrol, or highway state

patrol—stopped some cars that a couple of them had weapons in their car. So we knew there were out-of-staters, and probably the instigators of the trouble on campus with far more serious, intense intentions than we had previously expected to see. (14:03) But the rest of Sunday night was quiet. Monday, although there was an order, I think from the governor [James Rhodes], there could be no major gatherings. There was of course a big gathering on the commons. We were called over there, our company, part of our company, part of 107th Armored Calvary from Akron, based in Akron, were called over there to try to break up the gathering and encourage people to just go home. A lot of the kids did go home. They didn't wanna be there, their parents didn't want them to be there. We learned later from friends and so forth, from younger brother and sisters on campus at that time, that a lot of parents just told their kids to go home. Not enough of them did. But the environment on Monday was tense, there was a lot of yelling by the students, throwing of things. Um, it was not very pleasant. I was part of the group that pushed through the big gathering one direction, then we came back and some minutes after we got back to near the top of the hill, we heard, I heard one shot, and then I heard more shots and turned to my right saw some of my compatriots in the Guard firing their weapons. I never felt threatened, but it was easy to see how somebody would. Very disturbing thing. You know, I could sit back now and look at this as kind of a hissy fit on a big scale, thrown by the rabble rousers, maybe the communists, I don't know who also, the Weathermen, you know, I don't know who all the groups were. There were probably several dozen outside instigators who led the student body, those from the student body who chose to riot, into a confrontation that should not have happened. They shouldn't have been there, we shouldn't have been needed to be there. It's a very unfortunate thing. You think back to something that you were involved in personally that lead to a loss of life, it's not pleasant.

DS: (17:35) Where were you in the hours after the shootings? Where did you go?

DA: We stayed in place for a time, right where we were, and then we returned to the area outside of the practice field, where we stayed and kind of decompress. Weapons were checked, ammo was checked. Those involved with the shooting itself were more thoroughly interviewed. It was... yeah, everybody was pretty stressed at that point. Part of what set me on edge afterward is that media from around the country came pouring in Monday afternoon and evening. We were ending up back on street corners. And I happened to be near a downtown intersection with a couple other guys in my company and state patrol and/or sheriff's deputies. A car pulled up and parked right near the corner, and out jumped two guys who happened to be from *Newsday* on Long Island. One of them was an old friend of mine from Wooster—Jim Tedmond [?]. I yelled up at him, "Hey Jim, it's Dale!" He came over and the first thing he said was, "Why did you shoot?" Which shocked me, and really angered me because I had not fired a shot. But it was sort of the typical media response, is 'You guys made a big mistake, it's your fault, it's on your neck.' And they didn't know a thing.

DS: Do you recall if the National Guard issued any sort of instructions to its members in the days after the events at Kent State, again with all this media descending on northeast Ohio?

DA: (20:07) Uh, not to me, other than tell the truth.

DS: You've already given an example here, with your old friend from Wooster, but in the years after the Kent State shooting, how were you treated personally and professionally? Had people known that you were, you know, physically there in Kent?

DA: People were surprised and people took sides. And people took both sides. And the mix of people, family relatives, friends, you sort of knew which way people would lean. But you know, it was an even mix for me. And I, you know, the circumstances were painful to be a part of, but you know, I didn't fire a weapon. I didn't have any responsibility for any death at all. And so I just had to get over that, and understand people were gonna blame the Guard, blame me, or

support me and support the Guard. The fact of the matter is that those who gathered on Monday were law breakers. They were not supposed to be gathering, and so, all of them were in the wrong. But still, everybody I'm sure regrets what happened.

DS: How closely did you follow the investigation and the trials that followed?

DA: You know, I know that all happened, but I didn't follow it assiduously. I basically was aware of what was going on. It was... by this time I was, let's see, May of '70... I was still at the *Beacon*, or very, very early on into my time at Firestone. Let me think about this— '69, no the fall of '69, I was at the *Beacon*, but I was hired by Firestone in early '70. And so I knew everybody at the *Beacon*, I knew a bunch of people throughout the northern Ohio media, but I had already stepped away. So very quickly I was not in daily contact and I had my own things going on. I had my own new steps in my career.

DS: (23:50) How often have others reached out to you and asked about your time at Kent State?

DA: You know, after the first year, hardly nothing. Basically nothing. I'm not one to bring it up, and people are often surprised if we end up in a conversation and they say, "Hey, you were around Ohio then, were you at Kent State?" And then I fill them in a little bit, and they say, "Oh my gosh, that's a shock." But it's not something I have spent a great deal of time thinking about, or worrying about, or pondering about. It's there in my past, and unfortunate time. I don't know, somebody can probably draw out the geopolitical major points from the era, and point to Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, all this stuff as being changes that, blame the passions of the young people in contributing to this. I don't know. It's hard to read what our society does and how things affect it.

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

DA: Yes. My wife and I were back in the area, we have relatives in Stark County, quite a few relatives in Stark County, that's where my family's from. And we have a lot friends in both Akron and Cleveland. And so, oh this was about eight years ago probably, we were with Gary and Terry Lomas [?], twin brothers that were old friends of my wife. Terry had worked at Kent State, and so we went over there with them, went through the place they got set up there, and I signed the logbook and looked at all the stuff. You know, it really is, oh, that was enough. I don't need to go back there. And you know what, I heard that Janis Froelich is speaking at Kent State this May 4th. Are you kidding me? One of the most un-American women in our history is invited to go back there for that memorial? That's a shock.

DS: Do you believe the narrative, the common narrative of the Kent State shooting, has been fair to the Ohio National Guard?

DA: (27:11) You know, I think there's been a lot more blame placed on the Guard than warranted. For the reasons I have outlined. The other major question, which is the reason I initially pointed out and asked if you knew about Janis Froelich's *Tampa Tribune* article. Her unearthing of that Terry Norman situation and a possible cause of what exactly the first shot was, maybe being him firing in the air, and maybe being the trigger that caused it all to happen. I didn't have any—until Janis wrote that article—I had no idea where that first shot might have come from. We had heard rumors earlier Monday morning, that there were snipers on the building, a couple of snipers. Never been proven, I kind of doubt that. There may have been, you know, state law enforcement spotters or something. But that was one of the rumors that went through the troops. And the fact that there was a single shot, and some seconds of delay before the guys down the way from me turned and fired, ya know, I didn't have any idea until Janis's article that there might have been an outsider and the person of Terry Norman who fired that shot.

DS: In the fifty years since the episode, have your feelings about those events, have they changed over the years, in the five decades, you know, since they occurred?

DA: Yeah, I continue to read, learn. And I don't go out of my way to read about Kent State in particular, but just my understand about politics and society, public opinion, I look at those things, not only from a further distance because of the time, but just because of a broader understanding that I think I now have than I certainly had then.

DS: Mr. Antram, is there anything else that you would like to add to this interview that perhaps I haven't asked about?

DA: (30:24) No, David. I think that it's just an uncomfortable thing that happened in my past. I have mixed feelings about it, certainly. I don't have any sense of guilt whatsoever about it, but having been a part of it, I regret, I guess, that so much has been made of it. But it's 'the kids against the authorities' is how it's portrayed all the time, but the kids were misled, in my view, by outside instigators. And it unfortunately got very ugly. That's something everybody regrets.

DS: Well, thank you very much for your time.