

Kent State Guardsmen Oral History Project

Interviewee: **Jeffrey Jones**, Pfc, Company A, 1st Battalion, 145th Infantry

Interviewer: **Dr. David Strittmatter**

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Location of Interview: **Phone Call**

DS: This is David Strittmatter, Professor of History at Ohio Northern University, conducting an interview for the Kent State Guardsmen Oral History Project. Today is Friday, March 20th, 2020. And I have, on the phone, a guest here. So, what is your name and where are you from?

JJ: I am Jeffrey Jones. I live currently in Wooster, Ohio. Sixty-nine years old.

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

JJ: Well, I joined the Guard when I was still in high school, actually, at eighteen years old. Served for six years in the Wooster armory which, at that time, was an infantry battalion.

DS: And what led you to join the National Guard?

JJ: Well, it's kinda interesting. I was still in high school, my senior year. I was currently dating a girl whose older sister had either a boyfriend or a husband at that time, don't quite remember, which was also in the Guard. So, being young and naive as I was, I thought that would be cool if I did it too. Maybe to impress her, I don't know, but that's why I got into the Guard originally.

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

JJ: Well, I can say my time in the Guard was actually the start of something that opened my eyes to the ways of the world. How people think, how people act, how they react, different opinions, so on. That's been a learning process for me to this very day.

DS: How was it that you were deployed to Kent in May of 1970?

JJ: Well, as I recall, we were already activated on a truck strike. We were based in Akron, Ohio, and we actually slept in the old Rubber Bowl Stadium in Akron, Ohio. And we were there for a few days, I can't recall the exact amount of time. And then we were then called, straight from there, to Kent State.

DS: And what was the mood in Kent when you arrived?

JJ: (3:35) Well, when we arrived, I guess you could say tensions were very high. There was, I guess, the protesters had already created a tremendous amount of damage in town and the burning of the ROTC building, so on and so forth. So, to me I guess it was, I don't know how I could describe what I was feeling at that time but, it was just something I had never seen before. I don't know if amazing is the proper word for it, but...

DS: What are your memories of the morning of May 4th?

JJ: The morning of May 4th... Well, if I recall right, not sure if we arrived a day before or two days before, but on May 4th we got up and, I guess, there was a time set by the protesters that they wanted to be there and they wanted everybody they could get possibly to be there. We were aware of that time so they had us assembled in an area and, I guess, it was just before a place that I guess they call Blanket Hill. I don't recall that from the time, I remember reading about that, but we were assembled there, in the morning.

DS: (6:08) And then, as things proceeded throughout the day, what are your recollections for the rest of the day?

JJ: Well, I can't remember times, but, at some point somebody with a bullhorn started warning them—the protesters—that they were breaking the law, they needed to disperse, so on and so forth. This went on for a little while, don't know quite how long. Which the protesters were not responding to. So, at some point, we were given the order to disperse the crowd and the way we were doing that, we were all on a big long line there. We started proceeding up the hill. A few of our guards members were carrying our AR-79 grenade launchers, is what we called them, I

guess, and they were firing tear gas rounds into the crowd, trying to help disperse them. We had our gas masks on and we had our M1 rifles. We had bayonets affixed to the rifles and we started up the hill, more or less pushing the crowd back. Didn't seem to be dispersing very well. The tear gas helped us quite a bit. **(8:25)** Ya know, some of them would pick up the canisters and throw them back at us, but we moved on up the hill, over the other side of the hill, until we got to a place, and they say there was some sort of practice football field there, I don't recall that, but we got to a place where we ran out of tear gas. And shortly after we ran out of tear gas, the protesters realized it, that we didn't have any more and stopped shooting the tear gas. So, they got a little braver, I guess, and they started proceeding toward us. And there was quite a few more of them than they were of us, so we were given the order to retreat... start retreating back down the hill. And the protesters started getting closer as we were retreating. I think we reached somewhere around the top of the hill and the protesters seemed to be, well, they were a lot closer than they were at first and kept getting closer to us. And I am sure that probably everybody on that line was scared as to what was gonna happen. Now, there were reports, and I don't recall, but there were reports that some turned around and fired their weapon. There were other reports that everybody had turned around and had got down on one knee. I don't recall how that happened... the knee or if some just turned. And then there was, and I myself don't know why the shooting started at that point. I don't know if somebody just got panicked enough to start shooting. There were some saying that they heard an order to shoot. And I never did hear if they ever determined what started it. To me, I never fired any rounds myself, it was pretty much over with before I realized what was going on. **(11:28)** But, after we fired the rounds, and they stopped their protesting at that point and they dispersed, running and whatever. So, we then proceeded on back down the hill to where we'd originally started and we stayed down there. Then they, at some point, they had ambulances coming in to take care of the wounded. And then, I do remember the State Highway Patrol going into the crowd then, 'cause the crowd was just kinda lingering there in front of us and they were starting to build their courage up again. The State Highway Patrol, they built a human circle for a detention area. Other guards would go into the crowd, grab protesters and then they would put them in that circle. Eventually, I guess, they arrested them and took them away. Then, the crowd had enough courage that they, I guess their thinking was, that they was gonna come down there and teach us a lesson. So, they started down at us again. We were then given an order to aim over their heads, but not to fire, which we did. And when they seen that, by then they decided it was not in their best interest to continue on and they stopped. Now, after that point, I don't recall a whole lot from the rest of the day. At some point, either that night or the next day, might have been a day or two after that, I'm not sure, we heard the gang called Hell's Angels, the motorcycle riders, were headed our way with the idea that they were gonna teach the National Guard a lesson. So, if I remember right, we actually filled sandbags and made barriers that we could lay down behind in case it got to that point, where Hell's Angels did show up, but they never did. I did hear that the Highway Patrol was able to convince them to do something else, so they never did show up. Now, after that, I don't remember a whole lot about what else went on.

DS: (14:37) Do you recall if the National Guard issued any sort of instructions to its members in the days after the events at Kent State.

JJ: They may have. I don't recall, it seems likely, but I don't recall for sure that they didn't want us talking to anybody, because we did have to go through a number of investigations. I don't remember exactly how many investigations I had to go through where they called us in personally and asked us questions. I know there was a State High Patrol investigation, an FBI, I think there was one or two more maybe that I had to participate in. And it seems likely, I can't recall for sure, but it seems likely, they didn't want us talking to anybody other than those

investigators, at least for a while. If they released any orders for how long or whatever I don't recall that either.

DS: Do you recall following the trial that followed the Kent State shootings?

JJ: I didn't really follow it, per se, I believe I had heard a tidbit of information about it, here and there about it. I guess I wanted to distance myself from that, as far as I could, I didn't really talk to anybody about that, really, other than close family members that knew I was there because the attitude toward the Guards by so many, I would say most, was so negative, that I just didn't want to get into those types of conversations or put myself into that type of scenario where people were voicing their opinions at me or whatever was gonna happen. So, for the longest time, I never even told anybody I was there. **(17:07)** I don't know, it could have been twenty or thirty years after the fact before I even started talking about it with other people. I guess I didn't want to go through that kind of a situation.

DS: How have your feelings about the episode at Kent State changed over the years?

JJ: I don't know if it has changed a whole lot, my feelings. There is a belief I have, and I have had since the shooting, and I haven't told many people. I think, had the shooting not occurred, and everything else being the same, I think there is a great possibility that more people could have been killed or injured, including a number of guardsmen along with them. More protesters and guardsmen could have been killed or wounded. Now, the reason I say that is, I did mention that we had bayonets affixed to our rifles. Had the protesters gotten close enough to us where, instead of shooting, we might have thought it necessary to protect our lives by using the bayonets, it's hard to say what would have happened, how many could have been injured, killed, so on and so forth. I believe it coulda been a lot worse had the right things come into play. But, as far as changing my opinion, my opinion hasn't really changed. My feelings haven't changed that much that I can recall, anyway, over the years.

DS: (19:44) Did you keep any momentos, so to speak, from your deployment to Kent?

JJ: I'm sorry, any momentos from, uh?...

DS: Any artifacts, any newspaper clippings, uniforms, anything from your time in the guard?

JJ: Well, you know we all kept our uniforms. Of course, that's a good question, I thought I had my uniforms. I didn't keep them for any certain reason, if I did. I don't remember if we had to turn them back in or not. It seems to me... I know there was some we had cause we had to wear them home when we were done, but no, I didn't keep anything. That was a time and place I really didn't want to remember so I didn't really keep anything.

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

JJ: I haven't been in touch, I mean... Mac [Mathew] McManus, I think he was my sergeant, platoon leader, maybe. Him and I were neighbors for awhile, but I haven't seen him for probably sixteen to twenty years now. There was a few other guys, like three other guys that I went to school with who joined the Guard, but two of them I don't think might of been at Kent State, I think they might have joined afterwards, and then the other one, I'm not sure if he was even at Kent State. But no, I haven't kept in touch since about eighteen or twenty years ago, I guess.

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

JJ: Well, I don't recall driving my car up there, but I was a truck driver for over thirty years and there have been numerous times that I've been in the Kent area, delivering goods and I would drive by the campus, so on and so forth. I never really stopped, got out to look or anything, but I was up there by it in other capacities.

DS: (22:56) How often have you spoke about the Kent State events to historians or reporters, for example?

JJ: Well, I been trying to think, I'm not sure anybody. I know not recently, not in the past twenty years. I just don't recall anybody reaching out to me, wanting to speak about it. Other than some

people that knew I was there who may ask a question now and then. But, no historians or anything or anybody who wanted to publish anything.

DS: Do you think the narrative, the popular conception of the Kent State Shootings, has been fair to the National Guard?

JJ: That's a good question. I guess, there's some who have tried to be, whereas there's others who seem to have a biased opinion about what happened. Some of the articles online here that I been reading, it seems like some of them try to get it as accurate as they can, but others that I've read, seemed like they was pretty far off based on what I experienced up there.

DS: Are there any questions I have not asked or any comments you'd like to share in regards to the Kent State Shootings of May 1970?

JJ: (25:20) Well, there's... as I've learned, in life, there's certain things that comes up that you just can't prepare for because you have no idea they're gonna happen. Just like today and the Coronavirus, this is something nobody or very few imagined would ever happen. Kinda caught the world by surprise. The same way with the Kent State shootings, I guess. That was something that, as far as I know, had never happened before, in that way and I don't think anybody imagined in their wildest dreams that something like that could happen. Since that happened though, there's been a lot of changes made, a lot of training going on. I know, in the time after the shooting, I know we did and I'm sure around the country, National Guard units went through training for situations like that. They developed techniques and protocol for stuff like that. We went through the training and it certainly helped. Now, I don't know if anybody's had to use that training since then. But, to me, that event was something I don't think anybody would have been prepared for, especially us. I mean, I was only nineteen years old at the time. Life happens, we can try and prevent all the bad we can but, weren't not gonna prevent it all. Life happens and there's consequences from what happens. Other than that, I don't know what else I could add to that. Fifty years ago that event was, and I can't remember all the details anymore. Just a few things that'll probably stick with me and I think I already mentioned most of all of them.