

Kent State Guardsmen Oral History Project

Interviewee: **Jerry Damerow**, Sgt., Company C, 1st Battalion, 145th Infantry Division

Interviewer: **Dr. David Strittmatter**

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DS: This is David Strittmatter, conducting an interview for the Kent State National Guardsmen Oral History Project. And I have a guest with me today, so please tell us what is your name and where are you from?

JD: My name is Jerry Damerow, I'm originally from Akron, Ohio. I was with the Ohio National Guard in Akron, a unit in Akron. I was a sergeant in the C Company of the 145th Infantry Division, and I was a squad leader in that capacity. And I'm also a graduate, and I was at that time, a graduate of Kent State.

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

JD: It was six years, and that was of course during the Vietnam War. And that was the obligation, you had to be in. You went on active duty I think for around six months. Then served the rest of that six-year term in the National Guard with a summer camp trip to Grayling, Michigan every summer for summer camp.

DS: What led you to join the Guard?

JD: Well I didn't want to go to Vietnam, like many others. It was, you know, not something I wanted to do. And I was beginning my career in public accounting, and I was definitely interested in pursuing that so getting into the National Guard was a way to allow me to pursue my career, and do some graduate studies at Kent State as well, and not go to Vietnam.

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

JD: (1:55) It was very troubled times in our country, and certainly in the Akron-Cleveland area. So I definitely feel like I set aside my obligation to my country. You know, during that time there were race riots going on in both Akron and Cleveland. And actually right before Kent State, my unit was already on active duty because a Teamster strike where rioting had broke out. So we were already on active duty, and they just moved us over to Kent State when the incident happened over there.

DS: And what are your memories of arriving into Kent, Ohio, in May 1970?

JD: Well it's an interesting... like I said we were already on active duty in Richfield. We were camped out in Richfield, Ohio. And things with the Teamsters had I guess quieted down quite a bit, and I had asked my company commander if I could have Saturday night off. And that would've been what May 2nd I guess. Because my company up in Cleveland was having their big spring dinner dance, and I'd sure like to go to that, and things were calmed down and didn't look like anything was gonna happen with the Teamsters. So he readily agreed to let me have Saturday night off. So I packed up my car, went to Cleveland, and was at the dinner dance when we heard that students at Kent State had burned down the ROTC building, so I thought immediately, "Uh oh, here we go." But I had the night off. Thankfully I went home and went to bed, and went back to Richfield, Ohio, where my unit had been. And of course, as I expected, they were gone. So I kept on driving into Kent. And I still remember entering campus and the ROTC buildings were still smoldering, or the remains of them were. And there were a lot of people and National Guard all over the place, and I had a little bit of trouble finding my unit, but I did find them and settled in. They had us pitch our tents on the... what was then the football field. So we did that. And I remember the governor, the Ohio governor [James Rhodes], was on campus. And he gave a talk about you know what was going on, and as I recall it was kind of a stern talk, like you know we're not gonna tolerate this kind of behavior which of course were the violence of

burning down the building, which was understandable. So we had the rest of the afternoon off. That evening the students were assembling on the front corner of the campus, in front of what was then the library, it's not the library anymore, but on the front corner of campus. And we were ordered to go down there, and we were in a line, and this was Sunday night May 3rd, in a line kind of perpendicular to the library. And we found ourselves surrounded on all sides by students and demonstrators and I remember the officer in charge told us to kind of, you know, one person stand facing one direction and the other person stand facing the exact opposite direction, because we were surrounded, we had to kind of keep an eye on both sides so we wouldn't get attacked. And it was a frightening situation. We were down there totally surrounded. There we were with loaded rifles and fixed bayonets. And there was a lot of fear at that point in time. But we at some point in time, we were ordered to kind of get lined up together and start pushing the students up towards Franklin Hall on campus. Which we did. We had, and I guess we were throwing tear gas because we had tear gas masks on. And I remember the students were throwing rocks at us. It was a scary, scary situation. I've often thought it was a surprising that a shooting didn't happen that Sunday evening, because things were a lot more threatening and the students were a lot closer to us at that point in time, or at least closer to where I was. But anyway we shove the students up around campus, and things sort of dissipated, but we were ordered to stay on duty guarding one of the residence halls up there, because they didn't want the students, once they got back into the residence halls, they didn't want them to get back out. **(6:52)** So we were kind of just up all night on guard duty if you will, trying to prevent them from reassembling and doing something else. Morning came, and that was May 4th. It was a beautiful, beautiful day. Finally they let us off and said, 'Okay you can go back to your tents on the football field and catch some sleep.' And I remember I was about to do that, and crawl into my tent, cause I was pretty tired. And then the company commander came over and said, "Hey guys, they'd like us to go up around the commons area on campus," which is a big wide-open area, at the time was kind of in the middle of Kent State, it's not the middle anymore, but orders us to go up there. They said the students are gonna be assembling, we think it's gonna be peaceful, but we want you to kind of be on guard between the students and the burned out remains of the ROTC buildings. I guess. I don't know what they thought they'd do to the ROTC buildings, because they were pretty much gone at that point in time. They said, you know, "Not to worry, you'll be able to go to bed after this is all over. So just come on up." And you know. Yeah, you know it looked pretty peaceful. I didn't see anything too much going on. I remember one of the young women on campus put a flower in the end of the rifle butt of one of the National Guardsmen kind of down the line from me, so everybody seemed to be kind of in a peaceful, jovial mood. Jovial probably overstates it, but at least there certainly there was anything threatening going on at that point in time. The next thing that I recall happening is that, and I don't know who this was, because there were several National Guard units there at the time, and I was on the far left hand of the line as we faced Taylor Hall up at the top of the hill. But the next thing I remember is a Jeep going around kind of on the commons area between us and the students with a loud speaker basically telling them to disperse, which of course they didn't do. And then you know after some period of time, we were kind of standing there. And I remember there were some Ohio State Highway patrolmen to my immediate left, and man as soon as things started heating up, they were pretty crisp and bright, but they man they came to attention and marched straight off and that's the last we saw of those guys. And I don't blame them. We weren't very well trained for this kind of situation and my guess is they weren't either. **(9:44)** But at any rate, we got the command to disperse the students, put on our gas masks, and we're lobbing gas at them, and pushing they up towards Taylor Hall. And of course, when we got to Taylor Hall, the National Guard line had to split and go around the building. And the

guardsmen who did the shooting went around to the right of the building, and my side of the line went around the left. And I remember when we got around the other side of Taylor Hall, I was kind of relieved because you know the students looked to be like they're pretty dispersed and I thought, "Well things are over." And the next thing that happened, my company commander, Captain Snyder—Ron Snyder—ordered us to get back beyond, kind of on the side of Taylor Hall, and wasn't sure why at the time, I found out later that the reason he did that was he saw guardsmen at the top of the hill pointing their rifles in our direction, so it was for our own protection that he did that thankfully. Because at the time, before he executed that order, we were pretty much in the area where Jeffery Miller, the student who had been shot and killed, so we were definitely in harm's way. So we were behind the building, and I can say I wasn't sure exactly why, but then all of a sudden shots rang out, and it seemed like a relatively short volley, but I did remember bullets ricocheting off the dormitory to our left which I guess is [inaudible] Hall. At any rate, you know, we'd all been on firing range duty, so I know what bullets going overhead sound like. My first thought was that they were you know for some reason was that they were firing over the students' head to frighten them and disperse them. But then the next thing I remember, and it seemed to happen very quickly, there were just ambulances all over that back part of Taylor Hall. And we, you know, we were still kind of on the side of Taylor Hall. And Captain Snyder then took several of, I think maybe three or four guys from our unit, to go up around and I think surround Jeffrey Miller's body, and I think that was the famous photograph you know with the runaway girl [Mary Ann Vecchio] that you know think became famous after the incident happened. But they came back, and we were standing there and we were told, 'Well, the students are reassembling on campus, we have to go back down to our original position between the students and the burned down ROTC buildings because they're back at it again.' So we got down there, and I remember at that point in time, and I don't know how they did this that that quickly, but somebody at one of the dormitories over there to my right, some of the students had gotten a bed sheet and, probably spray painted, "Effing murderers" on that. And that was kind of hanging out of the side of the dormitory. The students were reassembled, I didn't know exactly what was going on, but it was really a frightening, frightening situation. You know, because of what had just happened obviously, all of the emotions on both sides were very high. So, um. We're standing there, and I, you know, fortunately nothing happened, of course we learned later that one of the faculty members [Glen Frank] there thankfully talked the students out of doing anything, and ultimately they went away and that was over. And the next thing that I think happened after that, they took us all into one of the dormitories into the dining hall portion and gave us something to eat. And I still remember they had music that was being piped into the dining hall, and a couple of songs, "Bridge Over Troubled Water," I think it was Simon and Garfunkel, and the Beatles' "Let it Be" were playing, and those songs for me will forever be burned into my brain and associated with Kent State. And I hear them and all those emotions and the feelings come back. But we were in the dining hall for awhile, and I'm not exactly sure how the timeline went, but we never did get back to the football field in bed. **(14:39)** And that evening is the evening of May 4th, we were told that, and I think it was the Students for Democratic Society, SDS, was gonna come and kill, they threatened to come and kill two National Guardsmen for every student that had been killed. And of course that was kind of a frightening thought. Anyway, they took us up to kind of surround Taylor Hall for some reason, I'm not exactly sure what they thought was gonna happen over there, but we were all positioned around Taylor Hall. The next thing I remember in the far distance there was this huge fire, and you know we looked at that and I said, "Oh my gosh, here they come." As it turned out, we found later, that was for some reason a barn had caught fire, and that was the fire we saw. But I'll tell you at the time it was kind of frightening,

you know we thought the SDS or whomever was gonna be coming after us. The next thing that happened, we were kind of sitting there on the hill by Taylor Hall, facing what was then Lilac Lane, which was kind of a walkway between the dormitories and some of the classroom buildings on campus, it was kind of a bushy area. I heard rustling in the bushes, and my squad was to my left, and all of a sudden I hear, "Click, click, click, click." They were taking the safeties off their rifles, and I remember saying to them, "Hold your fire." And it was good thing, because then all of a sudden a man appeared you know out of the bushes. I went over and asked him who he was, and it was a reporter of some sort. I escorted him back to the... to our command post, and told him I said, "You're awfully lucky, you came close to getting shot because no one's supposed to be up here." That was kind of the end of that evening. I don't remember when I finally got back to bed. I think they let us go back the next day, it was March [sic] 5th I think, the campus was totally closed down of course, I went back home to Cleveland. That was kind of the end of the incidents on campus. The only thing I remember after that, this was some time, and I'm not exactly sure how long anymore, but the grand jury had been convened. But one Saturday morning, there was a knock at the door of my home and went to the door and there was a guy out there with a suit on, which I thought was kind of strange for a Saturday morning, but it was a federal marshal with a subpoena, subpoenaed me to testify in front of the grand jury, which I did. (17:36) And I testified to the grand jury that I didn't think the shooting was justified based on what I saw. Because of what I said before, I mean everything looked pretty dispersed when I got around the side of Taylor Hall, I was kind of relieved, so to me it was really surprising and shocking that the shooting took place. And then when I found out that they weren't actually shooting in the air, that was of course very, very troubling. But that was my experience, and it was very painful. I really couldn't talk about it for awhile. For a long while. It was just pretty traumatic of course. And the students who lost their lives, and those who were injured and crippled because of that, my heart goes out to them, because I still believe to this day that the shooting was totally unjustified.

DS: How do you feel about Kent State today? You had been a student there, and then of course you were in uniform when the shootings occurred.

JD: Well, I think, you know when I graduated from Kent State, I think like many graduates you have very, very warm close feelings for your alma mater. I certainly did then. I had and I still have a lot of close friends and fraternity brothers that, you know, were friends of mine there. My wife's a Kent State graduate, so we have a lot of mutual friends that are Kent State... but the events of May 4th kind of robbed me of those warm feelings about my alma mater, and I still like Kent State, I still care about it. I've been back there. We were back there two years ago. We had some musical instruments that we contributed to the department of music there. And at that time, my wife and I both went back to the commons area, and I talked to her about it, and we walked across the commons area, the path that I had walked that day on May 4th, and the emotions just really, really come back. And actually, when you contacted me and asked me to do this oral interview, Kent State's not one of the things I think about often. But I started thinking about it and those old emotions come back. Not, certainly not as intense as they were a long time ago. It's been 50 years, so that's one of the real blessings that our mind doesn't, you know, have the same depth of feelings after that period of time but... but I guess the shootings and the May 4th incident did rob me of those deep warm feelings of my alma mater.

DS: (20:51) How often have reporters or historians tried to reach out to you over the years in regards to Kent State?

JD: Not at all really. Other than maybe one time, I think I did speak to somebody very, very briefly. That's been quite awhile ago, so I'm guessing maybe that was three, four, five years after May 4th,

1970, when I did. Interview would probably overstate it—it wasn't certainly as extensive as what we're doing now. And that's the only time I remember at all.

DS: When you were on campus with the Guard, did you recognize anyone from your student days?

JD: No, I did not. No.

DS: Are you still in touch with any of the other National Guardsmen that you served with?

JD: My company commander and I are Facebook friends. There's another fellow from my hometown, actually which was Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, which is a suburb of Akron, we're Facebook friends. That's about it. I've lost track of a number of them. Some of them are not with us anymore, I know that. But no, we have not, at least there may be some up in the Akron area that are in contact with each other, but that's been the extent of my current contact with any of those folks.

DS: The narrative of the Kent State shooting that is often told castigates and vilifies the guardsmen at some level. Do you think that narrative is fair to the guardsmen?

JD: (22:57) Well as I said, I don't think the shootings were justified. I mean, I'm as horrified as others that it happened. I mean... but I think the blame is not simply with the guardsmen that did fire, although I would be critical of them, because certainly there were lesser measures if they felt something threatening that could've been done other than firing, I guess they were M14 rifles at the time. But I think I'd also be critical of the command structure of the Guard, because you know those students were assembling on campus, everything was pretty peaceful, they were exercising their constitutional right of free speech, and I don't think there was any compelling reason to order them to break up in the first place. So if that hadn't happened, if we'd simply allowed them to give their speeches, do their talking, get those, you know that energy and those emotions out... So, I mean that's where the problems started, and the problem, I think another part of the problem, was how ill-equipped and how poorly trained we were for any kind of situation like that. I mean gosh. Loaded rifles and fixed bayonets are pretty harsh solutions for students exercising free speech on an American campus. So I think the government bears a lot of responsibility on what happened that day, as well as those who fired. Like I said, I don't... I couldn't see anything that even came close to justifying firing weapons at students.

DS: You said that you were subpoenaed and that you testified that you felt that the shooting was not justified. Did you experience any backlash from the National Guard organizationally or from fellow guardsmen?

JD: (25:16) No, not at all. And I think that testimony was not public anyways, so I don't think one way or the other would have known what I said. But no, there was never any kind of backlash like that. And the ones that fired, I think, I'm not totally sure of this, I think there was only one guardsmen from my unit that ended up on that right side of the line that said that he did fire, but I remember him saying that he had fired in the air and not at a student. So the ones that did the shooting were not part of my unit at all.

DS: And after you testified, how closely did you follow the trials?

JD: Well, I, you know, I don't recall for sure, but I'm sure that... my guess is that I would've followed them pretty closely because I had been involved. But I didn't... you know, I didn't attempt to go to the trials. I was working, probably working, 'cause I was in public accounting, so probably working pretty long hours.

DS: And finally, over the years, now fifty years removed, I mean, have your feelings about what happened, have they changed or have they remained pretty consistent since the event?

JD: I don't think they've changed one bit. I didn't feel the shooting was justified at the time, and I still to this don't feel it was justified. And you know, that hasn't changed a bit.

DS: Is there anything else that you would like to add? Perhaps a final comment for this interview.

JD: Well, I'm hopeful that this process that you're going through you know, will provide some documentation of what happened and you know hopefully we don't make these same mistakes again. I mean, there's a lot of lessons to be learned from what happened at Kent State. And I hope we learned those lessons and don't repeat this kind of things again. For pretty obvious reasons, people lost their lives, innocent people lost their lives. People were injured, and in some cases maimed for the rest of their life. There has to be a better way to handle situations like this. And I hope we can learn those lessons and allow people to exercise free speech, and you know certainly not fire... give loaded weapons to lightly trained national guardsmen, as a way of you know ending a situation like this.