

Kent State Guardsmen Oral History Project

Interviewee: **Keith Crilow**, Specialist-4, Company A, 1st Battalion, 145th Infantry Division

Interviewer: **Dr. David Strittmatter**

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DS: This is David Strittmatter, history professor, Ohio Northern University. Today conducting an interview for the Kent State Oral History Project. So, first thing's first. What is your name and where are you from?

KC: My name is Keith Crilow. I currently live in Wadsworth, Ohio.

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

KC: I was first enlisted in July of 1966 in the Ohio National Guard, after graduating from Wittenberg College in 1965. I did six years until July of 1972 when I was honorably discharged. In 1972, I was the rank of B5 Sergeant.

DS: And what lead you to join the National Guard in '66?

KC: The reason I joined the Ohio National Guard, in all truthfulness, and my personal situation I just had spent a lot of money to go to a private school at Wittenberg University, the last thing I wanted to do was be drafted and go to the Vietnam War where everybody was being sent at that time because the draft was in place at that time. So I was looking to serve my military duty in other ways, and fortunately I was able to get into a unit fairly close to where I lived. I was born and raised in Holmes County, and Wooster is in Wayne County, the neighboring county. So that was what I did, I got in the Ohio National Guard.

DS: (1:53) And fifty years later, how do you view your time, or how do you remember your time in the Guard?

KC: I remember my time in the Guard as fairly reasonable in terms of what we were expected to do. Unfortunately, during the time I was in the Guard, every even numbered years we ended up going to some type of disturbance or riot. In nineteen sixty-six [1966]—the first year I was in—we went to the Hough, or the Akron, riots in Akron, Ohio. In Hawkins Avenue [?]. Sixty-eight ['68], we were in Cleveland with the Hough riots [sic]. And then in 1970 we were in Kent State. Overall, it was a good experience, I just didn't have any summer vacation for six years, because it was always spent at summer camp for two weeks. But it was okay, I did my six years and I got out.

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

KC: We originally were deployed to protect bridges and overpasses during the national truck strike in 1970. There was a long-distance trucker strike of sorts I guess, and the ones that were choosing to run their trucks were being targeted by whoever, some people that would go on the bridges and overpasses and throw bricks or whatever down onto trucks as the they were going underneath the bridge or overpass. So we were deployed on I-71 at various places to keep the truckers that chose to ignore the strike and run the trucks. We were there to do that. And then we got a call from the state of Ohio, I think it was the Adjutant General [Sylvester Del Corso], or we were called by the commanding officer, I think it was [General Robert] Canterbury, was the assistant adjutant general, to go to Kent State because it was Saturday night [May 2nd], and there were break-ins in downtown businesses and some fires were set, so we were taken off of our bridge duty in Medina County and got in the trucks and they took us to Kent State campus, and we got there after dark Saturday night. I think that would've been May the 2nd.

DS: (4:36) And what was the mood like in the first 24 hours you were in town?

KC: Mmm, confusion I guess. There was all kinds of disturbances Saturday night, which we pretty much missed out on because it was already done and gone by the time we got there, what had

been done downtown Kent. We set up our tents and so forth. We were doing night duty, so we were stationed around the campus in various points during the night. Went back to our tents Sunday morning [May 3rd]. Got up some time around noonish I guess, and everything was calm and quiet. And then towards Sunday night when it got dark, things started flaring up again with some protests at the president's house, I think it was. So, the first twenty-four hours, kind of mixed of things, pretty quiet. We were not part of any confrontation, let's put it that way, we were in a very static situation, wasn't actively doing much.

DS: And then, what are your memories of May 4th, Monday?

KC: (6:01) Monday I just remember that we were woke, I don't remember what time it was. It was sometime mid-morning because we had gone back to our tents. There was two people in a tent, and we were you know sleeping, and we were woken up and said we had to get dressed, put our gear on, get our rifles, go up to the commons area because there was a disturbance going on. I think by then, I'm pretty sure in my memory—and I'm going to stick to this story as long as I live—martial law has been declared, some time either Saturday night or Sunday night, where a gathering of more than twenty-five people was considered to be illegal. They didn't want a bunch of people congregating. So anyway, we got up to this area I'm going to call it the commons, it was below the hill where we had then went up at, we were.. we get up there and there was a bunch of state highway patrolmen, their cars... I remember looking in the back of the trunk of some of the patrol cars, and they had everything that was needed to control a riot. They had shotguns with ammunition was salt—instead of pellets—it was salt in the shell. It was the kind of stuff that if you fired at somebody it would not kill them, it would hurt 'em. We had M1 rifles with live ammo. We had never been anywhere that was not under the control of a local police force. But in this case, we're up there on the commons and this massive, or not massive, but large gathering of students, I don't know if they were all students, I think a lot of them were the ones passing through Kent in terms of sewing their discontent among the students about protesting the war. There was a bull horn being used by, I think a professor, to egg 'em on to get 'em stirred up. And they were told to disperse several times read in the legal language. I don't know who was doing this, I think it was one of the gentlemen from Columbus, Ohio. He was a adjutant general himself, or the assistant adjutant general. And this was congregation of people that was in my mind, according to what I remember martial law, there were not allowed to be that many people in one place.

DS: (8:59) And what was the mood on the commons at that time, from your perspective?

KC: We were the bad guys, we were definitely the bad guys. There was a bunch of younger, you know college-age or whatever, that was the era of hippies so they were dressed accordingly. They were calling us names then, not as much as later on, but we were definitely the bad guys. I could tell the mood was not gonna turn out well, because it just kept building. And they weren't moving, and they were gonna be made to move, somebody was gonna be arrested, the ringleaders primarily. But I always thought that the state highway patrol would take over and we would be with them, but it ended up we went up the hill by ourselves, trying to corral the ringleaders of this group. So the mood was tense I would say.

DS: Yeah. And what are your memories of, kind of in the minutes that lead up to the volley of...

KC: Shots?

DS: ...rifle fire, and then afterwards?

KC: Well, the objective was to capture people, so we had tear gas. Tear gas was dispersed on the way up, they kept retreating, I forget the names of the buildings we went between. But all they did was scatter when we got up there and jump over six, seven, eight-foot fences and disappear and get out of range. By then we'd run out of tear gas, there's nobody to be captured. I'm thinking in my mind what was the purpose of this, because there was no corner that we were gonna corner

them in to take anybody into custody or arrest them. We were on our own, there were officers behind us telling us what to do. There was both the Ravenna and the Wooster Guard unit together. After we run out of tear gas, then we were told we were gonna go back through where we'd come up the hill right where that pagoda area was, and that's where we kind of squeezed down so everybody had to get closer together to get back through there. And that's when the uh... there was a construction project somewhere around there, there was partial bricks or parts of bricks. These people were picking up and throwing. I was, and a lot of the guys were, doing their best to make sure they weren't gonna get hit with anything. As they got closer to the building [Taylor Hill] where the line was squeezed down, and again we had been up all night. I don't think it started in our unit, it started to my left, and I think Ravenna was our left somewhere. Somebody had finally had enough of the verbal insults and all the racial slurs and everything else you could possibly think of and foul language being thrown at us, and the bricks and the whatever, that somebody just snapped, I'm gonna say. **(12:53)** 'Cause I never ever heard anything about shooting anything. In other words, my gun never came off of safety. But the tear gas was so thick in the air it was burning your skin everywhere it was exposed. Most of these kids were in twenty, thirty feet of us. They had no masks on, they didn't seem to be fazed by the tear gas. But somebody snapped and it was a chain reaction. And before it really came to a stop, one of the officers that was in the area of my line clunked this guy on the helmet he said, "What the hell do you think you're doing?" And I thinking, 'Uh oh.' Because I never heard any order to fire. I didn't think my life was in danger to the point of death. I was kind of scared, but I was doing everything I could to dodge everything that was being thrown. And then it was over in a matter of seconds. And there was this screaming of, "They got real bullets" when the firing first... Well yeah, we had real bullets. We didn't have blanks. But unfortunately, they were M1 rifles, and the M1 rifle has a killing capability of a few hundred yards a bullet, so it wasn't like a shotgun that goes a matter of feet. But it was unfortunate that the people that got shot probably really weren't the ones instigating the problem. And then we were eventually brought back down to the bottom of the hill, and everybody was asked do they need any more ammo. Because some people had fired and completely emptied the clip. Some of 'em—I don't know how many—but a great deal of 'em, I don't think knew exactly where they were firing they were just firing. And from my own personal standpoint, I never took my gun off of safety because I never heard the order to fire. And if you're in the military you don't do anything until you commanding officer tells you to do something. That's my... I'm glad I didn't fire, because I didn't... yeah, I was kind of ticked off, in fact I was really ticked off about the whole thing. But again, it was more of a matter of just ducking bricks and worrying about tear gas burning your skin as opposed to dying from something.

DS: (15:55) Where were you in the hours after the shooting?

KC: That's where it gets a little... right after the shootings, like I said we were reformed down at the bottom. Some of these people came right up face to face with us, again talking dirty and all that kind of stuff. Then they slowly reformed, and that's when the Ohio Highway Patrol, and I don't know maybe the Kent... City of Kent police or the Kent State police, together went up to this smaller group that had reformed again, and arrested a couple people or took a couple people into custody and that's when it all broke up. And uh... things, uh... we were told to go back to our tents. I think later that same day we were taken to a classroom somewhere or an inside building, and addressed by the [General] Robert Canterbury, telling us of our rights since we were employed by the State of Ohio nobody could individually be sued. Don't worry about that. There seemed to be a sense on some people's part that had fired the gun that they were gonna be in a lot of legal trouble later. They were assured since they were under the control of the State of Ohio, or working for the State of Ohio, that they could not individually be sued. I don't know

if it was that same night, Monday night, I'm pretty sure. I don't think we were there Tuesday night [May 5th]. We were told that the militant faction of the SDS—which was Students for Democratic Society—the militant faction of that group was called the Weathermen. They were on the way to Kent State to get even with the National Guard that had killed these people. So that same night we're back out on guard duty again around the campus. All night long, but nobody ever showed up except a professor came out of a building with a briefcase at two or three in the morning and all you hear "Click, click, click, click, click, click, click" everybody's gun coming off of safety until he was stopped by one of our officers who found he was... he had not gotten the word he wasn't supposed to be where he was. But everybody was ordered off campus that same day. But we spent the next night on guard duty again waiting for this thing that never happened. And I think then we went back to Wooster on Tuesday or Wednesday, I just don't remember. And I was interviewed, I don't remember if I was interviewed at Kent yet by the State Highway Patrol or not. I was interviewed twice by the state highway patrol and once by the FBI. One of those went with us to summer camp that summer to do the interview of everybody individually.

DS: And what did you tell the interviewers?

KC: I just told basically what I tried to say today. But you know as part of a unit that was trying to quell a disturbance and arrest the ringleaders, and things didn't work out and somebody lost their temper and started firing. I never heard an order to fire, so I never took my weapon off of safety. So I could you know, clear conscience say I never fired, I know I never shot anybody 'cause I never fired a bullet. To this day I'm glad I didn't because, I don't know 'em personally, but I know a couple guys in the Wooster unit had mental breakdowns later on over this whole thing. 'Cause they fired and they couldn't remember if their bullet killed anybody or not. Cause the carry distance of an M1 bullet is a hundred yards at least, which is three hundred feet, so you don't have to be very close to be hit by a bullet to be killed.

DS: (20:38) Did the National Guard issue any sort of instructions to its members after Kent State on how to navigate this?

KC: I just remember telling the interviewer, I don't know if it was the state highway patrolman or the FBI, I said this is the first time that I or this unit has been on active duty in a riot situation that we have not been under the guidance or the control of the local police force or a higher authority. Yeah, there was officers behind us, but they were not the ones with the weapons, they were... just had gas masks on and batons. But when we were in Akron, when we were in Cleveland for the riots, we were riding around in the police cars with the policemen. They were the ones in charge. Kent State was the first time the National Guard was put in a situation where they were the ones that were the main enforcer. I still to this day don't know why the state highway patrol was there, there was... I don't know, at least a dozen or so. And they had all the riot gear you would ever need to quell a riot. They had smoke bombs, they had tear gas, they had shotguns with salt pellets in the shells. Stuff that would not kill anybody but yet disperse a crowd. But they chose to send us up there with the M1 rifles and I know some of the people had forty-five caliber pistols. 'Cause one of the infamous pictures, the guy's [Myron Pryor] pointing his forty-five caliber pistol straight at somebody, pulling the trigger. That was my... the instruction I guess that they gave us, I just don't remember what it was, but I know I vocally voiced my opinion of I thought that was a bad decision to send the guard up there with the live ammunition when we had never been in a situation encountering such a... such a close confrontational situation that ended up happening.

DS: (23:11) Mr. Crilow, earlier you referenced the legal maneuvering, the kind of warning, announcement Canterbury issue. How closely did you follow the investigation trials in the years that followed?

KC: I really didn't. I just know that some of the Guar... I just know that, I don't know, didn't know them personally, I don't even remember their names, but there was one or two in the unit that I was with in Wooster that actually got a medical discharge before his time was up because he just had a mental frickin' breakdown over the whole thing. He was so depressed over the fact that he might've killed somebody, but he didn't know if he did or not. But I really didn't follow the trials a whole lot. Although each year when it comes up, I kind of you know, brought back some memories when I see it on television.

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

KC: No, no haven't been for ever since the day I got out. I have not spoken to any National Guard people that I was with since July of 1972. There was six of us that went in together, but we you know we didn't form lasting relationships that lasted past our Guard time.

DS: (24:51) How often have reporters or a historian for example, tried to reach out to you to hear your story of the events at Kent State?

KC: You're the first one. The other one was my grandson for his history project in high school. But as far as a reporter, officially, or like you're doing now, you're the first one. I always had my story to tell within my family, not publicly.

DS: In the years after the Kent State shooting, how were you treated personally or professionally if someone discovered that you had been there?

KC: Um. There was a couple times when they found out I was in the Guard in 1970 and they said, "Oh, you were part of the murders." And I said "No, I was there, I was not part of it. I never killed anybody." But, for the most part I never suffered any negative things because I was in the National Guard at Kent State.

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

KC: No. No.

DS: Do you think that the narrative of the Kent State shootings that is commonly told has been fair to the Ohio National Guard?

KC: (26:36) Not really. I know that we were called Nazi murderers by a news reporter on a Cleveland television station. I know that the narrative for the most part has been the unfortunate death of these students that had no part in this. At least two or three of 'em weren't even part of the protest. A lot of the protesting was being done by these transient characters that would go from... Kent State was a notorious stopping point for protesters on their way through the United States to stir up a student body. There were some other universities that were popular stops but... I lost my train of thought on that one. But no, I just... I just don't think the National Guard got a fair shake in some ways. Unfortunately, people react differently in different situations, and again somebody that day for whatever reason lost their temper, let those insults get to them, lack of sleep, being on edge, just said, "Oh you son of a bitch I'm gonna shoot your ass." And that started it, without listening to or waiting for a command. They went on their own. And that gave the black eye to the National Guard right there. Innocent students got killed. Students that... one guy [William Schroeder] was an ROTC guy. And he was not part of the protest, but he got in the way of a bullet. A bullet found him when he wasn't even close to the line of protesters I don't think. So, it's a catch twenty-two. I'm sorry it happened, I wished it would never have happened, but it some way the National Guard got a black eye over that.

DS: Mr. Crilow, is there anything else that you would want to add to this interview, perhaps a question that I have not asked?

KC: (29:09) No, I think that you've been very thorough, and very... comprehensive with your open-ended questions allow me to ramble from here to there. But, you know. There's nothing really I'd like to add. I just... again, I feel regret for the kids that got shot. I have no regret for the people that were right in our face throwing rocks and crap at us, I don't think a lot of them were

Kent State students. They might've been but I don't think... many of them weren't, they were just passing through stirring up trouble.