

Kent State Guardsmen Oral History Project
Charlton Oral History Research Grant Final Report
David Strittmatter, 2022-2023 Grantee

The Kent State Guardsmen Oral History Project seeks to record and document the perspective of the National Guardsmen in the narrative and memory of the Kent State shootings in May 1970. For half a century, the voice curiously absent in the story of this tragic event was that of the Ohio Army National Guardsmen. The 21 interviews that comprise this project hope to address that void, humanizing a rarely heard point of view, while adding substance to the story of Kent State shootings.

This final report summarizes the historical background of the event in question, the focus of the oral history project, a description of the narrators, and some themes which emerged in the interviews.

Background

The most well-known protest involving the Vietnam War occurred at Kent State University in Ohio. Following acts of vandalism in the city of Kent, the Ohio National Guard was called in to help maintain order. On Monday, May 4th, anti-war protesters scheduled a rally for noon on the campus commons. Attempts to disperse the gathering were unsuccessful, and tear gas fired by the National Guard proved ineffective. Eventually, 77 Guardsmen advanced on the protesters with rifles and bayonets. Twenty-nine eventually opened fire. The gunfire lasted just thirteen seconds, and the troops fired a total of 67 shots. Four students were killed, and nine students were wounded. Some photographs of the tragedy remain iconic and seared into the American consciousness. Fearing similar violent protests erupting on their campuses, hundreds of colleges and universities across the country cancelled classes for the remainder of the academic year. The shootings—also known as the Kent State Massacre—affected public opinion at an already socially contentious time over the U.S. role in the Vietnam War.

Focus of Project

The project began as an assignment in a public history class taught by Prof. David Strittmatter at Ohio Northern University. Students located names of Ohio National Guardsmen in contemporary news articles and government reports about the Kent State shootings. Then, using internet search tools, Strittmatter and his students set out to locate them a half century later. The urgency of the project was clear in that these men were now in their 70s and 80s. The sense of timely necessity for these interviews was evident in that an obituary for a Kent Guardsman was found for every two addresses. The first interview in this oral history project was conducted in December 2019. The collection of the interviews progressed intermittently, partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic but also the time required to build trust with former Guard members.

The interviews conducted for this project highlight the varied experiences of Ohio National Guardsmen deployed to Kent in May 1970. For years after the event, the vast majority of Guardsmen remained silent for they feared public backlash if their role was discovered. The intent of the project was to record and document their stories and memories, and to understand how the Kent State shootings touched their lives. The Charlton Oral History Research Grant from the Baylor University Institute of Oral History was awarded to Strittmatter after twelve interviews were already completed. The Charlton Grant allowed the project to continue, as nine more Guardsmen were interviewed between Summer 2022 and Summer 2023. This oral history project

represents the largest collection of interviews with Ohio National Guardsmen at Kent State since the investigation and trials.

Narrators

The narrators of this project were former members of the Ohio National Guard deployed to Kent State in May 1970, who were willing to be interviewed for this oral history project. The nine Guardsmen interviewed under the Charlton Grant were involved in the event in different ways. Six of the interviewees were on Blanket Hill at the time of the shooting, including one of the eight indicted Guardsmen. Another interviewee was stationed elsewhere on campus at the time of shooting, and he was arrested in his Guard uniform in 1977 for protesting proposed construction at the shootings site. Two of the interviewees were not in Kent on May 4th. One missed the deployment by a few days because he was at officer candidate school, while the other was in a tank unit which was not sent to the Kent State campus. The assortment of experiences offer a more nuanced perspective of the Ohio National Guard. The common narrative of the Kent State shootings often villainizes the Guard, which is framed as a sort of faceless perpetrator. These interviews give humanity to the Guard, while allowing these individuals to share their truth and lived experiences.

Themes

Though the memories and recollections shared by each of these narrators were unique to their own experience, several clear themes emerged from the interviews. Below is a brief summary of themes, and a selected excerpts from the interviews.

Draft Avoidance

Nearly every narrator admitted that he joined the National Guard to avoid being drafted and sent to Vietnam. Avi Weiss described this as a “hedge.” Some mentioned their likelihood to be drafted unless they signed up for an alternative military unit like the National Guard.

“I didn’t want to go to Vietnam,” said Michael Peters, “And our president at the time—Nixon—said he was not going to send the Guard over there. So, I joined the Guard immediately after graduating from college in ’68.”

“I got into the Guard because I didn’t want to go to Vietnam,” remembered Raymond Silvey. “Then I got number 289, and they would have never drafted me. I was already in.”

“The Vietnam War was going on,” said Robert Hatfield, “and I really didn’t think I wanted to take a trip overseas.”

“My mom called me at work and said, ‘You got a registered letter in the mail,’” recalled Arthur Krummel. “And so, I thought, Oh, it’s going to be the Selective Service notifying me I’m drafted, so I’m going to join the National Guard first. So, that’s what I did. Then I went and picked up my letter and it was from an insurance company that was rebating a little bit of money because my car insurance had changed.”

Ohio Locals

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that National Guard duty was a small part of these men’s lives. In 1970, many of them were married and some had small children. They worked a variety of jobs, from

truck drivers and construction workers to pipe fitters and public accountants. Many of the interviewees were employed by large companies central to northeast Ohio: Goodyear Tire & Rubber (3 interviewees), Akron Brass (2), the *Akron Beacon Journal* (2), various paper mills (3), Morton Salt, Rice Chadwick Rubber Company, Morgan Adhesives, and the Federal Reserve Bank in Cleveland. In other words, they were established or getting established in their civilian lives when deployed to Kent. The majority of those interviewed for this project still live in the region.

In Danger or Not?

The narrators' experience on May 4th varied widely, depending on their location in relation to the protestors. Some described being hit with rocks and other debris thrown by protestors, while others shared they did not fear for their safety whatsoever.

"I testified before the grand jury that I didn't really think my life was in immediate danger," said Steven Boss, who was on Blanket Hill. "I had a rifle in my hand and I had just been trained in hand-to-hand combat... I can't really say that I really felt my life was in danger. I was afraid because of the things that were being hurled at us..."

"I was coming back up the hill," remembered Barry Morris, who had been shooting tear gas canisters and got briefly separated from his unit. "I turned around and started double-timing trying to catch up with the rest of the troop, and I got hit in the side of the face with a rock."

Resentment over Portrayal

A dominant theme from the interviews centered on the frustration with how the media portrayed the National Guard in the aftermath of the Kent State shootings. Most of the interviewed Guardsmen feel the story that was told was biased towards the students.

William Herthneck, a lieutenant who was on Blanket Hill at the time of the shooting, was critical of the media's portrayal: "I didn't think they told the whole story. I thought they only told one side. They didn't talk about where we had been, what we came from. They didn't talk about what was actually going on there that day. They didn't—they never talked about the fact that [the protestors] were given multiple opportunities to disperse, to go home, to go back to their dorm rooms, to go back to their classrooms. None of that seemed to matter... But to me, it just left the Guard out there as if the Guard were the evil ones and the students were the terrible victims. I'm thinking there was victims on both sides."

"We were called Nazi murderers by a news reporter on a Cleveland television station," recalled Keith Crilow, "I know that the narrative for the most part has been the unfortunate death of these students that had no part in this... I just don't think the National Guard got a fair shake in some ways."

"I think there's been a lot more blame placed on the Guard than is warranted," said Dale Antram.

Negative Interactions

Most of the interviewees in this project did not recall specific instances of ill treatment because of their anonymity. But, a few narrators remembered negative interactions because of their association with the National Guard or the Kent State shooting.

“I’ve been called ‘kid killer’ many times,” said Barry Morris, one of the indicted Guardsmen. “Not up close... It was always done from a distance... We got a couple of calls. Said ‘Hey, we know where you’re at, blah-blah-blah...”

“When I came home from OCS [officer candidate school] and I walked off the plane, I was spit on by a young lady because I was a military person,” remembered Stephen Gagnon. “I was refused service at this drive-in restaurant. They didn’t tell me that until I sat there for a half an hour and watched other people come and go and get their food and leave and so forth. Finally, I asked the young lady where my food was—they had taken my order. She said, ‘I forgot to tell you we don’t serve green pigs.’ That was the last time I went there for food.”

A Long Silence

Multiple narrators described their reluctance to speak about Kent State over the past half century. Some chose silence over the possibility of being vilified over the shooting. Most interviewees were recorded for the first time as part of this project.

“I really didn’t talk much about it,” said Ronald Gammell, who was on Blanket Hill. “I don’t know whether if I didn’t want to... I wasn’t afraid to... A lot of the Guardsmen didn’t talk about it because they were afraid.”

“I guess I wanted to distance myself from that as far as I could,” said Jeffrey Jones, who was 19 years old when sent to Kent. “I didn’t talk to anybody about it, really—other than close family members that knew I was there. Because the attitude toward the guards by so many—I would say most—were just—it 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... So, for the longest time, I never even told anybody I was there... It could have been twenty or thirty years after the fact before I even started talking about it with other people.”

Outcomes & Future Projects

These interviews form the core of a project website: KentGuardVoices1970.com. I will present a paper based on this project at the 2023 meeting of the Oral History Association in Baltimore. By Summer 2024, I hope to secure a publication contract for a book about the memory of the Kent State shootings.

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I would like to thank the former Ohio National Guard members for trusting me with their stories. Some former Guardsmen interviewed within a few days of my making contact with them. For others, it took months—and even years in some cases—before these men felt comfortable enough to tell me their stories. Each of these individuals revisited and shared difficult memories. Their stories are important to studying the memory of a well-known tragedy in American history.