

Kent State Guardsmen Oral History Project

Interviewee: **Karl Brenneman**, PFC, 1st Squadron, 107th Armored Cavalry Regiment

Interviewers: **Lindy Holmes and Jordan Clagg**

Date of Interview: **03/06/21**

Location of Interview: **National Museum of Education, Stow, Ohio**

LH: Good afternoon. Today is March 6th, 2021. And we are currently in Stow, Ohio, at the National Museum of Education to conduct an interview for the Kent State Guardsmen Oral History Project. We wanted to thank you for participating. My name is Lindy Holmes. I'm a senior at Ohio Northern University majoring in history, minor in public history museum studies, minor in religion.

JC: Hi, I'm Jordan Clagg. I go to Ohio Northern University. I'm a history major, and I am pursuing a minor in public history museum studies as well. Could you please state your name and where you're from?

KB: Karl Hugh Brenneman. Greensburg, Ohio.

LH: How long and in what capacity did you serve in the National Guard?

KB: I served August of '66 to August of '72.

JC: Okay. Why did you decide to join the National Guard?

KB: Should I tell you why, or why did I join the National Guard? They were uh, first of all, the Vietnam War was wrong. They were killing 550 Americans a week, and it was an alternative. Every boy got his draft notice when he was 18. And they had to deal with it. So some guys said, "Well I'm going to go to college and get a deferment." So I just feel the war is wrong. And you know, you had to do something, because everybody had to deal with it. So, I chose the Guard because I didn't want to deal with Vietnam, to be honest with you. But at that time period, you have to serve your country. Anybody who doesn't do that is no good. They're just... you know. You have to serve your country. You had the option to go to Canada, but that's too far out there. Does that answer that?

LH: What was your full-time job during the guard?

KB: Nobody would hire you with a 1-A classification, that means you're ready to go. If you didn't have that, everybody in Akron would hire you. Because there were so few, everybody had to deal with that. So I walked into Goodyear, and got a job at Goodyear. And at that time, I got paid three dollars and forty-one cents an hour and that was huge money. I said, uh, "I don't know what I'm gonna do with all that money." I'll be kicking it away from the door to get in the house there will be so much money.

LH: (2:58) [laughs] You'll have trouble opening the door.

KB: Hard to believe that, isn't it? Starting wage... and that's factory money, I mean that, big time.

JC: How long did you work at Goodyear?

KB: Uh, well, eleven years, and then I moved on to another job. Then I went back to Goodrich for five. But at the time I was in the Guard, I was at Goodyear.

JC: What were some of the reasons that your guard unit was called out to Kent State?

KB: Well, Akron is also the trucking capital of the world, and they were having a truck strike. And they called us out for a truck strike. And if you know the Akron area, Archwood is where all the trucking companies were. We had to escort eleven Mason Dixon trucks to Kent. And we were... Archwood was lined with troops on both sides to get these eleven trucks out. The truckers, those were scab drivers, so they were throwing rocks at them as they were pulling the trucks out. And that was May 1st, May 2nd, somewhere around there.

LH: (4:11) Do you have any specific memories or specific emotions during the time you were being deployed to Kent?

KB: Yes.

LH: Such as?

KB: They uh, after the truck strike we went back to Greensburg. Then they put us in trucks on May 3rd, they put us in these trucks. And the truck has canvas on both sides, they strapped us in. Well why would they do that? You know, because they never did it before. So they took us and we rode and rode and rode, and they pulled up to a big, it was Kirkland's, which is kind of like a K-mart, it's not a Walmart. And they said, "go in there and do your business. Don't look at nothing, don't touch nothing, come back out." And so we get out of the truck and look around and I said, "boy this looks like we're up here on 43 heading into Kent." And I said, "I wonder where they're taking us." This is May 3rd. Back in the truck, they take us, we get out, we're in Ravenna National Guard Armory, because I saw it on the door when I went in. May 3rd. Okay.

JC: Can you describe the scene, and kind of like how you were feeling and how the other National Guardsmen were feeling on May 3rd. And did you guys have any idea, besides you kind of suspecting maybe you were going to Kent?

KB: I'm not going to have to go to jail if I say any of this? I'm kind of concerned about being put in prison. Go in, do what you're told. Go in and sleep on the floor of the gym at the Ravenna Arsenal. The next morning we get up and have breakfast, and it's May 4th, and they put us in formation, you know, where everybody lines up. They said, a captain—that's above a lieutenant—comes out there and says, "I have an announcement to make." Now we have no access to papers, cellphones, any of that. And he says, "Ten students have been killed, and four National Guardsmen. And we want you men to prepare to go into combat. Now if anybody would like to talk to a priest, we have one here, but make it quick." And my buddy standing beside me was saying, "Well what did he just say? What??" Somebody got killed. May 4th. He asked me this and I from the time of the shooting till I hit the campus, was I said twenty minutes, but it could've been a little bit longer, but it was within the hour. And he said, "We're heading in." So we go in, now we're raising up to campus, see what's going on, and we get to [Ohio State Routes] 59 and 43. Are you familiar with this area? Well, it's all changed now. Sidewalk is jammed with people. **(7:02)** The old guys are goin', "Hooray, hooray!" And the college students are goin' [shakes fists with middle fingers extended]. So we pull in, and my impression was mass hysteria. Um, people running every direction, you know just running, running, you know and everything, running. If you're familiar with where they put the statues up, that's Blanket Hill. And [Sunday] May 3rd, they burnt the ROTC building down and they called in the fire department, and the fire department is putting it out, and the students are cutting the fire hoses so they couldn't put it out. It burnt completely down. I mean, there was nothing there but the foundation. We get up around the top now, we're um... this is the sticky part. We're about forty-five minutes after the shooting. On the other side, the shooting was over here and we're at the top of the hill over here. And when I looked down the hill, it was like looking at the biggest rock concert you've ever been at. Blue jeans, just a sea of blue jeans. And they said "High port," which [means] hold the gun up here. And march down the hill and break up this uh, they were protesting. And I said, 'Now it's getting scary' is what's gonna happen. So halfway down that hill, finally they all got up and moved and left. And then this quiet came on the campus where you could not hear a sound. And they took the privates, like this, the corporals behind them, the sergeants behind them, the higher rank is back, back, back. And then, the dean of Kent—and his name was Woods—comes riding through in a convertible like a prom queen or a homecoming queen with a megaphone saying, "Please leave this campus, if you are not military personnel, please leave." And so then they kept us there doing guard duty for the rest of the week.

LH: (9:09) So, after your arrival and after the shootings, were you feeling any kind of anxieties?
Mostly confusion?

KB: Frightened, what I would answer that with. 'Cause you don't know what's coming.

LH: Frightened for yourself?

KB: Yeah, what do you think, you know? And then they were doing a lot of construction there, so they had a lot of stuff to throw. And stuff's coming out of the sky, like a beer can half full of urine comes flying through the air, and it didn't taste too good. They lowered sheets over the side of the building up the National Guard. Did that answer it? Am I on the right track?

LH: Yes, of course.

KB: Alright.

JC: What do you recall about the media coverage of the shootings? Do you remember like right after the event what was on TV or...

KB: No, because we didn't have access to the TV or the paper, we didn't know any of this, you know, until after the shooting.

JC: Sure. Were you there for how many days do you know approximately?

KB: A week.

JC: A week after?

KB: A week after. We stayed in that, we ate in the dormitory cafeteria and slept on the gym floor. And they kept foreign exchange students, they let them stay. But they closed her down, shut off the roads, you know that type of thing. Oh, I should say this, agitators were here. And they had black flags. And we were ordered, "If you find a black flag laying on the ground, turn it in." You know, because they brought in outside agitators. And then when everybody, after they cut the fire hoses the looting started then that's when they called in everybody. Plus, all of the National Guard... or highway patrol was there too. So, they were all there.

LH: With all of the interest surrounding this event, did you follow any of the media coverage and the trials after this?

KB: Yes, somewhat. About, uh, there was a picture of a guy who caught the shooting, and he was an officer, which is above a you know, and the picture caught the gun in the recoil. You know when you shoot a forty-five the bullet goes up, then the whole thing comes back to reload? They caught, the camera caught that with it on the return, which means he fired it. Okay? I told him, when you went to Kent they issued you nine rounds of ammunition to put in an M1 rifle, okay? So, if every, if it was us, we'd all have nine rounds. After the shootings they collect the bullets and if you didn't have nine rounds, you did the shooting. Okay? They claim, you said 67 rounds? I was told nine rounds, and they had it down to eleven guys. Ninety-nine rounds went into a crowd of college students and four of them get hit. Wow. And you know the famous picture of the girl [Mary Ann Vecchio] standing over the guy [Jeffrey Miller] who got killed? She ended up being a runaway from Massillon, which is about fifty miles, how 'bout that?

JC: Do you remember how you feel after you had spent the week at Kent, coming home, how did that transition go? Did you go on to another deployment after that or did you go home or?

KB: (13:18) No. I was over then. I personally was in the '68 riots in Cleveland, the '69 riots in Akron, and '70 in Kent. So. My part in it.

LH: The years following the Kent State event, were you in any instances treated differently or treated poorly because of your involvement on campus or your involvement in the National Guard?

KB: No.

LH: Not in any instances?

KB: No.

JC: Have your feelings about Kent State or those years in general changed over the years, or do you have any thoughts about...

KB: Well, let me go back to Vietnam, and lord that, you know Nixon's campaign in '68 was that he was going to get out of Vietnam and talk everybody into voting for him, and he became the president in '68. In 19... two years later, after losing 500 Americans a week for two years, he goes into Cambodia. You guys know all this. And that was the final straw. That's when they said they started protesting. And that you know, this war has to end, I mean it's just getting too bad.

LH: (14:58) So you said that you didn't, you weren't really involved any instances of discrimination as a National Guardsmen, but before this have you ever spoke publicly, maybe privately about any of the events that surrounded you at Kent State?

KB: Yes, I've told anybody that would listen.

LH: Did you have a specific reason for that?

KB: No, I just, well, because you know it was a very historic thing, and I... my part in it, you know. I felt, I didn't shoot the gun. I was a tank commander and carried a shotgun, and I put the bullets in my pocket because I wasn't gonna shoot anybody. I mean, you know, let's get real here. What a shame. The reason they sent them into Kent with ammo was because they sent them into riots and they had no control because they had empty guns. You've seen pictures where they put the flowers in the end of the barrels? You know, they have no control without... whoever was in charge said, "I'm not sending them in without ammo."

JC: Are you still in touch with any of the National Guardsmen...

KB: The other ones I was in with, yeah. They feel the same way.

JC: That you do. Do you talk with them frequently, or do you ever get together to discuss what happened or...

KB: Mmmmm. [shakes head no]

LH: Would you think that they would be also interested in a project like this?

KB: Mmm. Most of them are dead. It was only fifty years ago.

LH: So, with the conflicting emotions you have towards Kent State, have you ever returned to the campus since that event?

KB: My daughter went there for four years.

LH: Oh.

KB: But here's something very interesting. When we went into Kent, we were under order. And your orders were: "When the officer in charge of you fires his weapon, you unload yours." After Kent State, they said, "You only fire your weapon when you feel your personal life is in danger, and you must be fired at first. Anything short of that is murder." And a guy stood up and said, "Well what if they're throwing firebombs in a building and there's women and children in there? Can you shoot him?" And he said, "No absolutely not, because your personal life is not in danger." Do you find that interesting? That they changed it? Yeah?

LH: So, this sort of, in the same scope of that, the narrative that's been presented at Kent State towards the Ohio National Guardsmen, do you think that that has been unfair?

KB: No. I think that they were, well you have no choice, you have to, you know at that truck strike, we're escorting those trucks, and we go by Goodyear, and I'm in the truck, or the jeep escorting 'em, and I'm going by the guys on strike at Goodyear, and these are the guys I work with. You know what I'm saying? And being you know, a union man, but you have no choice.

LH: Right.

KB: Is that what you're getting at, that type of...?

LH: Yes, yes, yes.

JC: So you were a part of the union at Goodyear, is that right?

KB: Mhmm. [Yes.]

JC: And then, there were fellow strikers who were also a part of the union? Is that correct?

KB: Mhmm. [Yes.]

JC: So you knew personally...

KB: When we escorted the trucks, they're trying to break the union, the teamster, you know. Do you see what.. you know, the position you're in?

JC: Mhmm. That's a very conflicted. I'd imagine.

LH: So with these different positions, and sort of uprisings of riots, do you think that in these contemporary times with the events surrounding George Floyd, and all of the riots, let's say like in Washington D.C., do you think any of those events hold some parallels to that of Kent State?

KB: Mmmm, maybe a little bit, yeah.

LH: In what ways?

KB: (19:42) Because of the war. You know, they wanted to end it. It was time for them to get out. They didn't get out for what, '73? You know and, they did get out though. They had a war they couldn't win. And they were, see it was stimulating the economy because there was so much work. Everybody's working and that type of thing. They used to say, "Stimulate the economy: invest your son." How 'bout that?

LH: That's quite the propaganda.

KB: And I hope that don't put me in prison, saying things like that.

JC: So, if there are some parallels between the protests that happened during the war and now, do you think that maybe much has changed as far as just protesting in the United States in general, or media coverage of that, or how people feel about any of that at all?

KB: Look what it's... you know when you look at the black thing, you know how much they've come from, and what they've had to go through and endure and all that. It's made some gain.

LH: So, the narrative towards the guardsmen at Kent State you said, seemed a little bit fair. Do you think that any of the contemporary events that are happening that are going on, do you think there should be a change in the way that things are dealt with?

KB: (21:41) No, I have no comment on that. I just think that, they do it, you know just like changing the rule. Unload your gun when the officer in charge of you fires then change it to the other, you know. It didn't work.

LH: Are there any specific topics that relate to any questions that maybe we haven't asked? Something that you would like to say?

KB: No. I just wouldn't want anybody to have to go through that again, you know. Especially dealing with the draft and all that. Horrible, horrible, horrible. But we got through it.

LH: Yeah. I have no further questions, so it was a pleasure meeting you. And we thank you for coming out here, it was very good for us.

KB: Glad to do it. Happy as can be.

LH and JC: Thank you so much.