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Oral History Presentation – Kent State Shootings and War Protests

Part One: The Oral History Itself

I was born in 1973 and thus did not live through the "Turbulent 60s." However, I have relatives who did. I contacted my wife's cousin, whom we affectionately call "Uncle Richie." Uncle Richie was a student attending Kent State University at the time of the student shootings. I prepared questions, and we spent time talking about what happened on that fateful May 4, 1970. As Uncle Richie reflected, he remarked that the story must begin before that terrible weekend. The times were turbulent to say the least. In 1966, there were National Guardsmen on the street corners of major cities throughout the country, as well as in Cleveland, protecting the civil rights of blacks. Uncle Richie was working in the city and never thought that he would see anything worse in our great country.

The war in Vietnam was another world away, and Richie was temporarily deferred from the draft. Hippies were getting high, love children were loving each other, draft dodgers were going to jail or to Canada, women were burning their bras, and President Johnson was escalating the troop strength in Vietnam.

For Richie, it was going to be a great year. He had graduated from high school, was dating a wonderful girl (Aunt Tammy), and was going to start Cuyahoga Community College. After a year at CCC, Richie transferred to Kent State University and lived on

Campus for a while. A year later, he got married and lived in Euclid, just outside of Cleveland, on the east side. Richie worked part-time at an ice cream store and commuted to campus every day. Tammy worked in the city, and Richie felt that life was good!

In 1969, Richard Nixon became president; the war continued to escalate; anti-war protests were common; yet Richie still had his deferment, and life was stable. Richie felt that Nixon ruined all that. The law required that when a man turned eighteen, he registers for the draft. Many men knew that the strategy was to obtain a deferment to avoid being called to active duty. There were many avenues open to middle-class white men, but few to lower-class black men. Uncle Richie continues ... the military was full of black soldiers, led by white officers, all getting high on drugs and both dying for their country. White officers were frequently college graduates who were trained through college Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs. Protests targeted colleges with active ROTC programs. Nixon needed more troops for the war, and by the end of 1969, Nixon had disallowed most draft deferments and initiated a lottery system based on a person's birthday. Richie's birthday is November 27, and he was number 47 out of 366 dates in the lottery. Uncle Richie was called to active duty and was accepted into an Army Reserve unit (people with high numbers were having their names removed from waiting lists). Richie felt reasonably safe. He completed six months of active-duty training to become an Army medic, attended training two weekends per month, and attended summer camp for two weeks each year for six years.

Friday, May 1, Uncle Richie came home for the weekend. He began receiving reports about the protests at the university and the riots in downtown Kent. By the end

of the weekend, the news was reporting that the National Guard had taken control of the campus after students had burned several buildings in Kent, including the ROTC building on campus. Monday, May 4th, Richie left for school early to see what was happening in Kent. The National Guard had downtown blocked off, so he was unable to see the damage. He was shocked when he saw the campus. The football field was a sea of pup tents. Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs) were all over the campus, and armed guardsmen were everywhere. The military had taken control! Uncle Richie went to the student center to study, but found it impossible. There was too much activity, and he was curious. As he left the building, he found himself being stared down by a soldier. Richie soon left when he heard there was to be a rally on Blanket Hill, the commons.

From that moment on, Richie was wrapped up in the crowd. He joined the rally and found it comical. The Guard was at one end of the field, and the students were at the other end. The Guard started firing tear gas canisters at the crowd. The experienced protesters in the front of the line put on gas masks, picked up the canisters, and threw them back at the guardsmen. Soon, the guardsmen began moving toward the protesters to disperse the crowd. The students began moving back. Uncle Richie found himself in a small group that had broken away from the main crowd and was being pursued by armed guardsmen. They moved around a cluster of tennis courts and were reapproaching the main group when the gunfire began. Richie ran to the nearest building for protection, Dunbar Hall, his old dorm. Soon, several wounded people were carried in, and only then did he realize what was actually happening! It was time to leave town. Campus was locked down (students were not permitted to move freely off campus.) Richie was parked off campus. He contacted a friend, and they worked their

way off campus, got to the car, and found all the back roads out of Kent. They were safe. Richie jokingly remarks that this wasn't bad, as there were no cell phones or GPS to aid them. Classes were cancelled, first for the week and then for the remainder of the semester. Professors assigned work to complete courses and receive grades.

Less than two weeks later, Uncle Richie received orders to report for active-duty training for six months. In Uncle Richie's exact words, "Life was hell!" Training was tough. The first three months were basic training, where one learned to be a soldier. Richie was trained alongside enlistees, draftees, reservists, and National Guard members, all of whom received the same training. They learned to kill and to survive. Uncle Richie recalled from his training that Kent State National Guard personnel were never trained to handle civil disobedience, even though their purpose was to protect the state's civilians. Guardsmen only knew how to obey orders and to shoot when ordered. Bullets were all they had for their rifles, and they were used to kill four students and wound nine others, including one who suffered permanent paralysis. Today's National Guard is better trained to handle riots, protests, and civil disobedience. This training is one of the many lessons learned from the Kent State murders.

Richie returned to Kent once since May 4, 1970. He completed his senior year as a Kent student but took classes through Cleveland State University. A few years ago, Tammy and Richie were in the area and decided to visit the campus. Nothing looked the same to them. There is a memorial on the grounds of Kent State University that commemorates the events of that day. There is also an annual commemoration to remember the event. Off campus, very little is said to remind us of the times and the tragedy.

For a period of his professional career, Uncle Richie served as a substitute teacher for 5th- and 6th-grade students. While teaching history, Richie was surprised to find references to the Kent State murders in textbooks. Richie remarked, "I guess I never looked at those times as having historical significance. But there it was. And I was there."

Part Two: What I Learned From This Project

I have always been interested in history. At that time, newspapers published articles, and radio and television reported on the Kent State Shootings. I was born after these events and had not previously heard of them. I grew up in Canada, which had a very different perspective at the time. There were student protests on campuses all over America concerning their country's involvement in Vietnam, but since Canada was not involved in the war, the most that country experienced was muted displays of student unrest. The United States Declaration of Independence declares, "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." These three aspects are considered inalienable or sovereign rights of the human person. The Canadian motto is "Peace, Order, and Good Government," which appears in the Canadian Constitution. Thus, the 1960s were not as turbulent for Canadians in general and for students in particular.

I think that many Americans still do not favor going to war abroad, but the forms of protest have changed. The media would have us believe that most Americans would rather their country get out of the foreign conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, we

learned our lessons and try to ensure that protests take a different form so as not to allow them to escalate to college campus shootings, such as occurred in Kent State.

Dedication

I am Jeff Corbett's father-in-law and knew Richard Klein quite well. He and Tammy introduced me to my wife of 51 years. I am writing this dedication of the narrative that Richie gave to Jeff as a memorial to a terrific person and friend. I was not aware of this narrative, though I knew Richie was on campus that fateful day. He never discussed it with me. It was a different time. I was luckier than Richie, as I drew a high draft number in the lottery. I did not have to endure what he went through, basic training and learning to do everything that a soldier does, whether he wants to or not, obeying orders. Richie's no longer with us, having passed 2 years ago. May his memory be for a blessing. May we never see a return to those divisive times where our great country is torn apart.

Rob Altshuler, friend and admirer.
2026