

Submitted by Harry Fitch

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In September, 1965, I transferred to Kent State just a few hours shy of being classified a junior. The university “stuck” me in Clark Hall with two incoming freshmen. “lambs” from high school who were already more worldly than I was.

The Vietnam War was still young, so many students either were pro-war or apathetic. The Kent Committee to End the War in Vietnam was either non-existent or in its infancy. In fact, Kent had two nicknames—Suitcase State, because of the many students who went home every weekend with dirty laundry for their mothers. And Apathy State, because political activism of any kind was practically nil.

As stirring of anti-war protest grew on campus, most students who reacted at all did things similar to what my roommates and I did. We posted “GIVE THE CONG HELL” in our window at 428 Clark Hall for anyone nearby to see. But gradually, sentiment changed. By the time I finished studies in December 1967, the majority of students were anti-war. But the vast majority of those were not involved with KCEWV, just silently anti-war.

Over time, “radicalism” (if you want to call it that) increased. Student groups walked out on Vice President Hubert Humphrey during a speech on campus in the spring of 1968. And, as I was in the service in Arizona, beginning later that year, activism intensified. My “secret” wife (we had eloped in December of 68) wrote letters to me in the spring of 1969 about the “eerie” atmosphere on campus, particularly during the time of the Music and Speech protests. If you don’t know about them, look them up.

Still, on May 4, 1970, as I was stationed at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona, “Suitcase State” and “Apathy State” were familiar nicknames to me, although they had become archaic. But they were the Kent State of my experience.

So when I came back to the public information office around noon that day, the news from Kent was spreading nationwide. In the summer, Arizona was three hours behind the East in time, so word was out in the press.

I do not remember who it was that told me that students had been shot at my alma mater by National Guardsmen or even if particulars about dead and wounded were yet on the news. Or accurate. I do know that I either stood or sat in disbelief. Not Apathy State. Not my alma mater.

I also do not recall the depth or length of my emotions, but I know they shifted between anger, sorrow, numbness and others. Eventually, I determined that I would have to do something dramatic, feeling unable and unwilling to serve in the military of a nation where such a tragedy was perpetrated by an arm of government, the Ohio National Guard.

Word eventually came that there would be a student rally at Arizona State University, across the metro Phoenix area from Luke, either that night or the following one. A handful of us decided that we would attend. I had determined that I would go there in my Air Force uniform and tear it off before the crowd, claiming that I could not and would not wear it any longer.

The more I thought about it, the more I changed my mind. I maintained that I did not want my wife to suffer all the ramifications thrust upon her by enduring her husband's certain court martial. But maybe I did not relish the thought of being placed in a military stockade, separated from her. Regardless of my motive, I decided I would address the students if given the chance.

Perhaps no more than a few hundred students were at the rally when we arrived. Only a few more came afterwards as best I can recall. A student leader stood on the stage before us and said whatever it was he had to say. Then he asked if any of those in the audience had anything they wanted to add. I rose and walked up to the stage with a handful of others.

The leader gave me a "suspicious" look. I don't know if it was because he did not recognize me or if my short military haircut caused him pause. But I was determined to speak and eventually he handed me the microphone after a few others had spoken.

I started, my words barely audible even with the microphone, "If you have trouble hearing my voice, it's because I'm a graduate of Kent State University." Murmurs undulated through the audience. I continued with something like, "I never met the students shot at Kent State, but I knew them." I continued with a little more, stating that "we are all brothers and sisters." I ended by merely advising, wishing, "do what you feel you have to do."

I believe they, like many other student bodies across the nation, closed their campus for at least a short period in protest.

Whenever I think back to the shootings, I wonder where I would have been if still on the campus on that fateful day. Would I be changing classes like Sandy Shearer? Would I be curious like Bill Shroeder? Would I be protesting like Allison Krause and Jeff Miller? Or would I, a journalism major, be covering events for the Stater? I believe I would have, with the professionalism instilled in me by our journalism faculty, been covering the events. I often think of the phrase "there but for fortune. . ."

It remains true that I never met the victims of that day. But it is also true that because I lived, studied, and walked on this beautiful campus, I did know them. And so, bitterness remains.

One final observation: To me, it is appropriate that the May 4th Center resides in the old Stater office space of Taylor Hall. Responsible journalism has told the story of May 4, 1970, on that day and ever since.