

Anti-Vietnam War Riots at Ohio State University

By Forrest Brandt

May 4, 1970: Morning was near perfect, cool but warming, bright sun, blue sky, dew twinkling on the grass, but a slight scent of tear gas was in the air. The Columbus police had been taking it out on the students the night before. Sirens and the thud of tear gas canisters and knee knockers filled the evening.

I took off a bit before 8 taking my cameras with me along with 7 rolls of 35mm film. Crossing High Street, I entered the campus by the gates at 15th. There was the Oval, the heart of the university, split in two by contending forces, hundreds of students in tye die, Levis, and flip-flops on one side and a company of National Guardsmen in full battle rattle forming a barrier in front of the Administration Building.

In the next hours, the weather would warm, the Guard would become an entire battalion and the student numbers would swell into a thousand or so. I quickly became aware that the M-1's the Guardsmen held carried live ammunition.

By the time the Orton Hall chimes announced noon, the clashes had become ardent. Smoking cans of tear gas arced through the air above the crowd, chant's of "Pigs off campus!" grew angrier. I stood in the middle of it all taking photos in both directions, unable to take sides.

I didn't agree with student deferments. In my nine months at Ft. Lewis prior to Vietnam I had figured out that each time a student was given a deferment another male, usually black or rural white, was drafted in his place. I knew about McNamara's hundred thousand - an intentional lowering of the AFQT score to make more young men eligible, men who would ordinarily be found unfit for service - an act that enabled the DoD to continue to allow deferments and keep suburban families happy.

Then there was my experience in Vietnam. I didn't believe the government of South Vietnam had the will to remain free. I'd been called into JUSPAO in April of 1969 and told that ARVN was winning the war, that US troops were merely there in support and I needed to do more to get that story "out there." This was shortly after the battle for Bien Hoi Air Base, a battle in which First Division troops had held the line and then turned the flank on an NVA regiment, while troops of the 25th ARVN high diddle diddled back to Saigon rather than fight. JUSPAO wanted me to say that ARVN routed the enemy.

I was there when ARVN troops dropped a grenade down a village well during a sweep near Di An, An act that was sure to ruin any part of our division's efforts to "win the hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese. My weekly trips to Saigon and AFVN left me feeling that ARVN and the population of South Vietnam were only willing to fight as long as the Americans carried the load. Everywhere I looked in Saigon and the country markets I saw young men riding on motor scooters or walking around in civies. Why

weren't they in uniform? In comparison, the stories and photos that came into division PIO seemed to verify the determination and sacrifice the North Vietnamese were willing to make. Like the students in America, I didn't see anything that told me the war was just or winnable. But what about the National Guard? I knew they didn't want to be on campus chasing students around. They were missing work, being paid the paltry amounts privates and specialists earned. Some were farmers, unable to plow and plant at this critical time frame in the growing season. This was hardly a spring break for them. I knew how uncomfortable it was to wear a gas mask during a short training drill. They were out there for hours, masked up and maneuvering. I knew they weren't pigs anymore than my fellow Vietnam veterans were. They were simply doing their duty.

But since retiring to the states I had discovered how white and connected the guard was. I was an assistant S/3 for an Army Reserve truck brigade filled with doctors, dentists, PHDs, salesmen, lawyers, and management types. How had they managed to avoid the draft and Vietnam? I now knew the answer; political connections, a friendly neighbor who was also a doctor or lawyer. Yeah, it wasn't fun to chase college kids around a campus, but it beat the hell out of being in Vietnam.

My head whirled with confusion while I watched the scene on the campus of a school I had come to love. I couldn't pick a side any more than I could decide what to think about my two-year hitch and time in Vietnam.

Out of film, I headed back to the apartment sure that someone was going to throw a brick or a stone and a Guardsman was going to lose his cool. The danger was palpable.

Then came the news from Kent State - I had been right, it was just a matter of which campus would explode as the scene was repeated across the state. Walter Cronkite's evening news ended with a list of the colleges and universities that would be closed for the foreseeable future, starting with Amherst and running to Xavier. Higher education came to a halt across America.