Forty springs ago, on the day the Vietnam War came home as it never had before, Mary Ann Vecchio was there. She's the girl in the haunting photo — crying, kneeling over the student's body.

That was Kent State University, May 4, 1970, a few days after Richard Nixon, who'd campaigned for president on an implicit promise to end the war, widened it by invading Cambodia. Across the nation, students protested. At Kent State, where two days earlier the ROTC building was burned down, National Guardsmen fired into a crowd and killed four unarmed students, the closest of whom was about 200 feet away.

Rarely has an American home front been so traumatized — Yale historian Jay Winter calls the Kent State shootings "a wound in the nation's history" — and for a time the school was so ashamed it shortened its name to "Kent," and changed its logo.

'Eradicate the problem'

In 1970 the United States was in what the President's Commission on Campus Unrest later would call its most divisive period since the Civil War. The Vietnam War, stalemated after five years of intense U.S. ground combat, was the target of increasingly aggressive, sometimes violent protests.

When Nixon announced the Cambodia invasion on April 30, campuses erupted. In Kent, some students rioted outside the bars downtown the following night, a Friday. Saturday night, protesters set fire to the ROTC building, and slashed firemen's hoses. Even before that, Gov. James Rhodes, a Republican, called out the Ohio National Guard.

He called the protesters "the worst type of people that we harbor in America," and said: "We are going to eradicate the problem. We are not going to treat the symptoms." On Monday several hundred students gathered on the campus commons to rally against the war and the Guard's presence. The soldiers used tear gas to move the students off the commons, followed them up and over a small hill, and formed ranks in a practice football field.

A standoff ensued. Students kept their distance, chanting slogans — "Pigs off campus!" — and hurling rocks and bottles, few of which reached their targets. Then the Guardsmen retraced their steps up the hill, heading back toward the commons. The crowd had swelled to several thousand, including protest supporters, observers and bystanders. Many of them now relaxed; the confrontation seemed over.
"It was OK until they got up on that hill," Vecchio recalls.

Suddenly, about 12 Guardsmen turned 130 degrees, raised their rifles and fired. "I heard the shots," Vecchio says, "and kissed the ground." In 12.53 seconds, 28 Guardsmen got off 61 to 67 shots. (Some fired into the ground or the air; 48 Guardsmen did not shoot at all, according to the FBI.)

Vecchio found her friend, Jeff Miller, bleeding to death. There was nothing she could do. She screamed, "Oh my God!" Also killed: protester Allison Krause; Bill Schroeder, an ROTC student who'd been watching the protest and was shot in the back; and Sandy Scheuer, who was walking to class. Nine students were wounded and four died. One, Dean Kahler, was shot in the back as he lay on the ground. The bullet left him paralyzed for life. Another, Alan Canfora, ducked behind an oak tree as a bullet passed through his right wrist. Canfora says today that after the Cambodia invasion, "We wanted to bring the war home. But we never expected that."

The shootings provoked America's first national student strike, closing hundreds of campuses, and inspired an anti-war anthem — Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young's Ohio. Newsweek put the photo of Vecchio on its cover under the headline "Nixon's Home Front." A Gallup Poll found that only 11% of Americans faulted the Guard; 58% thought the demonstrators were partly responsible for the carnage.

Based on an FBI investigation, the Justice Department concluded that the Guardsmen were never in danger and that their explanation — they were surrounded, outnumbered and fired in self-defense — was a fabrication. Later that year, a presidential commission called the shootings "unnecessary, unwarranted, and inexcusable."

A state grand jury declined to indict any Guardsman, a federal judge dismissed civil rights charges, and no one spent a day in jail. In 1979, the state paid $675,000 to the wounded students and the families of the dead to settle a civil suit. The Guardsmen signed a statement of regret, not apology.

Many felt there was nothing for which to apologize. Ron Snyder, a Guard captain that day, says the shootings should not have occurred, but they were no massacre: "A massacre is something that's happening in the Sudan."

Kent State's enrollment declined almost 20% over the next decade and did not pass the 1970 level for 17 years. Around Ohio it was known as "Chaos U."

Five days after the event, over 100,000 people in Washington, D.C. came together to demonstrate their opposition to the violence unleashed upon the students. The shootings marked a turning point in the student anti-war movement, radicalizing some and frightening off others; helped seal the eventual demise of the military draft; and, in the opinion of his aide Bob Haldeman, marked the beginning of Nixon's descent into the political paranoia that led to the Watergate scandal.

Although it happened in broad daylight before thousands of witnesses and was captured in hundreds of photographs and on film and audiotape, Kent State remains what the writer William A. Gordon calls "a murder mystery."

So do the questions: Did the Guardsmen fire out of fear, or anger, or on command? What explained their seemingly sudden and synchronized volley? Jerry Lewis, a sociology professor, was in the parking lot when the Guard opened fire. He's been studying the question ever since: "I don't think we'll ever know why they fired. I don't think they know."