The Guard Is Poorly Trained For Riot Duty

WASHINGTON—In the aftermath, it seemed an all-too-predictable tragedy compounded by the bitterness it engendered on a national scale.

The elements of the confrontation at Kent State University, where four students were shot to death by Ohio National Guardsmen, seemed calculated to provoke violence—angry students, jittery soldiers, loaded weapons, and, perhaps most crit-ical of all lack of rigid discipline.

Plucked from their civilian jobs one week before and sent to Cleveland to enforce peace during a labor strike, the guardsmen came to the Kent State University campus weary, nervous, and resentful of students who burned down an R.O.T.C. building in protest of President Nixon's dispatch of American troops into Cambodia.

Unlike Federal troops, who wear the uniform seven days a week and who might even consider civil disturbance duty a welcome respite from the boredom of garrison chores, the soldiers in the National Guard are unused to tight discipline and control for prolonged periods. They undergo relatively little training — as a unit — in simulated riot conditions.

After the Newark and Detroit riots of 1967, the Kerner Commission recommended increased and upgraded riot training for the National Guard. The Pentagon subsequently formulated require-ments for 33 hours of civil disturbance training, but since that time the requirement has been cut back to 16 hours of "refresher training" and eight additional hours for new recruits.

The National Guard is instructed by Continental Army Command to carry out this training between January and May. This effectively serves to prevent the units from devoting the prime training period — the annual two-week "summer camp" —to teaching soldiers how to cope with riots. Instead, the time is spent in regular combat training, because the National Guard still maintains as its primary mission the support of the Regular Army in conventional combat situations.

Secondary Assignment

The guard's role in maintaining order and public safety as a state militia remains a secondary, and hence inferior, assignment, and the arrangement of priorities is reflected in the erratic

Students confront a National Guardsman in the frenzy after four students were killed at Kent State University last week. The tragedy, in the eyes of many, pointed up the need for more rigid discipline among Guardsmen, who are civilians who do occasional military duty.

performance of riot duties.

Just as their training is basically not designed to deal with problems arising from civilian disorder, so the main weapons at their command—rifles and boyonets—are poor and improper tools for dispersing demonstrators without inflicting serious and perhaps fatal injuries. The equipment carried by the soldiers themselves—designed for combat troops engaged in shooting wars—is insufficient to protect them from demonstrators hurling rocks and bottles. In some states it is inferior to the protective gear worn by riot police.

The rules under which the National Guard operates are another subject of controversy. The rules are based on guidelines formulated by the Department of the Army. However, when the National Guard is acting as a state militia under the control of the governor—as it usually is in riot situations — it can follow its own rules.

The troops at Kent State University complained of sniper fire and said this triggered the return volley into a crowd of students, but no evidence of snipers turned up immediately. Under the Federal troop regulations, soldiers are to be backed up by sniper teams composed of expert marksmen to control sniping, but no such marksmen were attached to the Ohio soldiers.

Unless the training and equipment of the National Guard are changed, a former staff member of the Kerner Commission warned, what occurred at Kent State University "could happen again and again. . . . I don't think we can afford to have this kind of improperly trained and poorly equipped force to deal with such explosive problems."

—JUAN M. VASQUEZ.