

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Ben Varner
Topic: **The 1989 SCI Huntingdon Riot**
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Interviewer: DOC Communications Director Susan McNaughton

Interview Transcript

McNaughton: Hello, I'm Susan McNaughton the communications director for the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections. I'm working on a project where I'm collecting Oral Histories, specifically about the 1989 Camp Hill Prison Riot; however, we would be remiss if we didn't mention the October 23, 1989, incident at the State Correctional Institution at Huntingdon. Talking to us today, September 5, 2019, about the Huntingdon incident is Ben Varner. Thank you for joining us Ben.

Varner: You're welcome.

McNaughton: What can you tell me about the incident... first of all – let me back up... Please tell us about your DOC employment history.

Varner: I started in corrections in 1972 at SCI Huntingdon and I went up through the ranks to the rank of captain, and when SCI Greene was being constructed in 1992, I was promoted to deputy superintendent and transferred to SCI Greene. At Greene I was eventually promoted to superintendent. I was moved from Greene to SCI Retreat as superintendent and was there about a year and a half. Then I was moved to SCI Dallas as superintendent for about a year and a half, and returned to SCI Smithfield in Huntingdon County near my home and was there approximately a year and a half and I then retired with 31½ years of service.

McNaughton: Wow. Congratulations, that's a long career.

Varner: Thank you.

McNaughton: At the time of the October 23rd incident at Huntingdon, you were the shift commander, is that correct?

Varner: That's correct.



Ben Varner

McNaughton: Tell me what that whole incident was about, because unfortunately that incident gets overshadowed by the Camp Hill Prison riot, but I think it's important for people to understand what happened at the institution. What was your first inkling that you had an issue, and exactly what was going on? Kind of lead us through what you experienced.

Varner: We had been having – prior to the incident there on the 23rd – minor incidents with the Muslim population... them just kind of flexing their muscles.

If I recall, there was a sergeant that was assaulted... had a broken jaw... and they just kept becoming more and more aggressive.

On the Friday prior to the incident... when the inmates returned... came down from the chapel from Juma services, there was a large group of them converged right outside the control center demanding that I come out of the control center and talk to them.

I told them I wasn't going to come out there... that it didn't work that way. That they needed to go to the yard or go to the block, it just didn't work that way with them coming up and demanding that.

So, luckily, they agreed to do it and they went into the yard and as soon as they did, I notified the deputy and the major and said, "We need to lock the jail down." They agreed... kind of let things cool down some. So, we locked the prison down on Friday afternoon. Over the weekend, we fed them, as I recall, a tier at a time.

I had worked my whole career at that point on 2-to-10 shift, so I knew that shift well, and kind of had a feel for everything on that shift. I had all of the young officers on 2-to-10. So, when I came into work on Monday, the day of the incident, I met with Deputy [Andy] Domovich and Major [Jim] Price and Superintendent [Tom] Fulcomer. They had met with inmates throughout the day and on Sunday and were assured that things were ok... they were going to be alright. They had come to a decision that we should feed them [the inmates] one block at a time.

I argued pretty strongly against that, because when you are on 2-to-10 shift, that's all you have [employee wise] as just your shift. I said, "Let's wait and we'll open it up the next morning on the 6-to-2 shift when you have the 8-to-4 shift people there and you have a lot more people. But they felt pretty comfortable then [because] the inmates had assured them there'd be no trouble.

So, we discussed it some more, and I said, "Well, how about at least giving me a squad of men in reserve that I can have somewhere in case something doesn't go right." They agreed to that, so I had approximately 10 extra men that I held in the RHU as kind of my reserve.

We sent the first block, A Block -- which is the block that ended up being in the riot -- down to eat, and I had a junior captain there named Captain Kyle ... and I kept him out... I'm in a secure bubble there but I can see everything that's going on in the Rotunda... I kept him out front to keep a monitor on it, and I had him talk to all of the officers in the block then.

The last thing that I wanted to happen... was... if something happened... we don't give them the chance to take any hostages. We can always go take a block back, but I don't want them to have any more officers in there.

I'd had the same situation [happen] about a year or so before that over an inmate who had come to our prison that had AIDS, and that was the saving grace... was that I was able to pull the officers out so they didn't have anybody to take hostage and beat up on. So, that was kind of... from past experience... that was the way we were going to roll.

The inmates went down to eat, and they came back. As soon as they came back, a large group of them gathered on the one side of the block. The sergeant reported it to Captain Kyle, "These guys are up to something down there. We're banging the bars telling them to go on in, go on in, and they're not going in."

So, I pulled six or seven of my reserve officers out and sent them in there. Anybody [inmates] who didn't want to get involved in whatever these guys were up to or whatever, let's try and minimize what we got. So, they were able to lock some, and then Captain Kyle came to the corner there and said he wasn't liking the feeling of it.

So, I told him, "Well, pull the officers back down to the front of the block, and if anything looks like that they're going to try to rush you or anything, slam that grill so that they can't have hostages." So, we pulled the officers down, and they were directing the inmates, "Go to your cells. Go to your cells."

All at once this group of inmates just rushed the front of the block.

The officers all stepped out on the control center side of the grill, and Capt. Kyle pushed the door shut. They [the inmates] came running up around the side of the block, they had gone in their cells. Some of them had table legs. I think there was... at that time there might have been some of the scaffolding brackets, and of course they came up around there thinking they were going to beat up on some officers, and they had no one to fight with.

McNaughton: Thank goodness. I do have quick question. How many over all inmates were housed in that block, and of those, how many were involved, and how many officers were on the block?

Varnier: On the block there would have been sergeant, and at that time we probably had three officers in the block. I believe I sent six or seven of the reserve officers in whenever they came back.

Usually you had a ring of keys that all of those grills leading out of the rotunda area... like all of the spokes that go off into each cell blocks... that's on a ring. I had taken them all and brought them into the control center just except A ... and actually, whenever they came back from chow, I took that one so that if some inmates got in the block but out into the center and we could shut the grill, then they couldn't get the key and open it back up and it would be... we'd have a smaller amount to deal with.

That block at that time... it had 128 cells and most of them were doubled, so you were looking at around 240 inmates in that block, and 70 or 80 [inmates] were in the group that came up. A large amount.

They immediately started trying to set fires. They busted up the schedule board on the wall that told you which inmate lived in what cell, and the desk got flipped, and you could start to hear things crashing.

At that time, Major Price was in his office doing a report on what had happened over the weekend about locking the jail down Friday. I remember I called him and said, "If you're not too busy, Jim, we've got a riot going on. You better get down here." He came down.

We blew our whistle... you know, we're right there in town, and it always brings the troops running. Activated the emergency plan... our call chain... and got a firehose as quick as we could there to the front of the block and just maintained. There was a lot going on.

I know they set up a command post out in Superintendent Fulcomer's office, and he was constantly calling me and wanting a report from me, and I'd fill him in and he would tell me what was going on.

There was a big discussion on... maybe the best thing would be to fire a couple of rounds down into the block, and there was a lengthy discussion about "are we going to use buckshot, can they take regular shotgun shells in there... birdshot... or do we got to use plastic shot?"

We're getting a lot officers... a lot of people coming in dressed in riot gear, and I think, you've read the report. I can remember they said we had to have so many state police there before we could do it, and right out in front of the control bubble there were 8 or 9 of them [state police] lined up across there... and I could remember looking out at them and they looked like kids standing out there. They were... They must have been newbies coming up from the academy to get that many, and that's scary... all that screaming and yelling and banging around. I could remember looking out at them and thinking, "I bet they're thinking 'what did we get into here.'"

They formulated their assault plan from out in Fulcomer's office, and he called me and told me what was going on. You've read the report, and they positioned everything. Then Tom [Fulcomer] called me and he said, "Ok, Ben, from here on in it's yours. You're in charge now. You're inside, so you're running it. If you need to shuffle people from down below up to the chapel, whatever you've got to do, it's yours now."

Of course, Andy [Domovich] stepped into the chapel and fired the rounds down through the block, and you read the report -- it's pretty extensive about how they assaulted and moved down the tiers -- very well organized.

Everybody communicated real well back so that we were all on the same page, and I can remember at one point there was ... Jim Grace, who ended up being the superintendent there... came out... he was the lieutenant then... he came out onto the box there on the corner where he could talk to me, and he started to catch his breath and he said, "Ben, I think we've killed six of them so far." I was like, "This is... boy... you're in there. You really don't know how it's going because officers are coming out with ... one came out with a broken arm... the first one came out had got hit down over the head and had blood running down over his face, and you're just hoping we sent enough soldiers in there... that they were going to be able to handle it.

I know right before it actually got down to the hand-to-hand and fighting them, Lt. Hammond called and said, "Ben, they want to talk." I said, "Well, tell them to lay down and we'll handle this, and then we can do the talking later. But they've got to lay down and be quiet about it." Of course, that just set them off and they started throwing everything they had. It was a real donnybrook for a while.

McNaughton: How long did it last?

Varner: I'm thinking that we ... it seemed to me it took 45 minutes to an hour or better before the word was given to go ahead and assault. Actually, going down through until things were settled down... it seemed like forever, but it was probably from the time Andy fired the shots... I want to say a half hour. Some of the guys... they were there for the duration and they were not going to quit until they were completely subdued. There was no giving up in them.

McNaughton: I wanted to go back to ... you were talking about communicating. How, back then, did you communicate with the officers? Did you have radios?

Varner: Yes, we had radios. The lieutenants had radios. Capt. Myers at one point was given a radio and he stayed on the grill on the control center side of the grill. He would send the officer in. They had radios and when Capt. Kyle... I had him on the A grill, from where he was at to the corner of the secure control bubble was probably 15 feet ... 20 feet at the most. So, as these guys were in the initial there before they came up there and tried to take the grill, he would come over to me and say, "Ben, I'm not liking it. I don't like it." But we were getting inmates locked in, and reducing the amount [of inmates] that we were going to have to deal with. Then he came over and said, "I, I, I'm starting to get a little shaky." I said, "Bring them [the officers] out. It's time. Let's get them out. Get them right down there at the grill, and if they decide if they want to go in, they can go in. If not, just have the officers step out on the outside." So, we were in direct communication. It wasn't over radio.

McNaughton: Right, and I was thinking as you were talking about the first couple of days leading up to this -- how the inmates were kind of congregating in front of the control area. I think -- for people who don't know Huntingdon, like you said... -- the control area is in the center and then the cell blocks kind of... like a wagon wheel, they jut out from there. Had you had all of that movement going on and those inmates staying in that area, that could have been really bad.

Varner: Yes.

McNaughton: And it could have spilled into the other cell blocks and vice versa. At least you had the forethought, "This isn't right." You needed to have better control of movement, and you were able to keep it smaller. Potentially, it could have been really big.

Varner: Yes. Fortunately, or unfortunately, that had happened to me twice before. We had a riot in C Block... one of the blocks that come off and one in D Block. The one in D Block was the first time that a cell block that... we talked about later on... that we ever abandoned the cell block to save the officers. We had gotten a... and I'm kind of digressing here... we had gotten an inmate in that had AIDS, and the inmates were upset that we put him in population, and they did

the same thing. They were going to take over the cell block and come at the officers with clubs. But I was the junior captain out on the floor that night, and I pulled the officers out just as the inmates came rounding the corner with sticks and clubs and broom handles and [were] going to beat up on the officers and the same situation. I had already had a little experience doing that and just used the same thing there whenever A Block jumped off.

McNaughton: Tell me what was different about the inmates. You said they were the Muslim inmates that seemed to have the problem. Then of course, in Camp Hill, the Fruit Of Islam inmates were part of the issue as well. What was different about these inmates for you at Huntingdon?

Varner: We had had a good bit of trouble with them. They were just always pushing. If you had to deal with one of them, it would turn physical, and then a bunch of them would come and want to see... they would have all sorts of demands. Specific issues, right now are not coming to mind, but there was a lot of tensions with them. They just became more arrogant, pushy.

McNaughton: Were they, overall, a younger group of inmates? Were they in their 20s?

Varner: Actually, the Fruits Of Islam were the young ones. They were real mouthy. They stirred it more than your Sunni's. The Sunni's ... I remember there were three or four of them that were trying to calm things, but they had a lot of young inmates and they were just feeling their oats and would try to push the limits.

On Friday afternoon... I don't know what they expected... that they were going to issue a bunch of demands, but my main concern was making sure that they didn't take the jail then. And then as soon as I notified Deputy Domovich and the major and told them I was able to agree to get them [the inmates] out of the center, I secured the rest of the jail and all the grills were locked. The inmates who were in the center were moved to A yard. We secured the rest of the block and then brought them in a few at a time and locked them up. I think it could have [gone off] right then, because I wasn't going to leave the control center, I'm running the shift. Had I [gone] out or went out to talk to them, I don't know where that would have [gone] from there. They didn't get a chance at that point to take the jail.

McNaughton: Did they actually want *you* or did they want the shift commander and you happened to be the shift commander?

Varner: They wanted me. As shift commander, I'm the captain there and I probably knew more inmates by name than anybody in that jail. At that time, I had 17 years in, 16 on the 2-to-10 shift, and knowing how prisons run, on 2-to-10 shift – from 4 o'clock on – when work lines come in, those inmates are in your face all of the time. I ran cell blocks. I knew a lot of the inmates. They knew I knew about all of them by name. They saw me in there, and they wanted to talk to me. Now, had another captain been there, I don't know if they'd have done the same thing or not.

McNaughton: What happened to the leader of this incident then? Were they kept there and then charged or were they shipped to other institutions, and particularly, did they end up getting shipped to Camp Hill?

Varner: You mean on Friday?

McNaughton: Yeah.

Varner: No. Nobody was shipped out then. There were some of those inmates... I don't think anybody got locked up over the Friday incident, because we ended up ordering them to leave the control center and to go out to the yard... that I wasn't going to come out there and talk to them... a mob like that. We just kind of stood there. They could hear me on the speaker box. I said, "It's not going to happen. You want to talk... you guys see me out here all the time. We're not going to do it this way. You need to go out into the yard."

McNaughton: What about after the Monday incident?

Varner: That night... a lot of them were taken over and put in the RHU. There were inmates taken to court, sentenced for assault. A lot of the inmates were shipped to other institutions. They took some of the leaders... the inmate Imams that they knew and got rid of them.

It was a tense situation for a good while after that. I can't recall how long we kept the institution locked down, but as soon as we could get back in there that night, we made sure ... we had everyone go back in... we had one lock broken, and the guys went and checked the cells doors and made sure that the bars that held them and everything was good and secure. We had three different doctors in that night and treated a lot of the inmates there... stitches for cuts. If I recall, there were 43 officers that went to J.C. Blair Hospital to be treated.

McNaughton: You said one had a broken jaw and one had a broken arm and one had a head laceration.

Varner: The broken jaw was before that... a week before they came down from the chapel from Juma service... a week or two... a guy name Sergeant Weaverling had his jaw broke. There were a couple other physical incidents there that were close to that. Like individual inmates being defiant and physical force had to be... physically restrain them and take them to the RHU.

McNaughton: After things finally settled down and then a couple of days later... it was October 25th. What did you think when you heard about Camp Hill?

Varner: I just thought... first thing that came to my mind... I had got a call about going to Camp Hill to be a deputy. It was Terry Henry who called me and said, "Ben, why don't you come down here to Camp Hill and be the other deputy."

I went down and rode around and looked around and I decided, no, I wasn't interested in that.

The next day... was the 25th... I came into work 2-to-10 that day, and Fulcomer was there and he goes, "Ben, they called up here and wanted me to send you down to Camp Hill." And he said, "Unless you really object, I told them now that we still have a lot of tension here, and we have a lot going on and you're the shift commander here, and I'm not letting you go." Now, we were pretty good friends at that time, and I said, "Nope. This is my jail. I'm going to stay here."

I just felt bad for those people down there. It's easy to second guess people and I just felt so sorry for them and those officers for what they had to go through. What can you say when you heard the horrible things that happened?

McNaughton: I actually interviewed Tabb Bickell who was a hostage during the first night at the Camp Hill riot, and didn't he later go on to be the superintendent at Huntingdon later on. Now he's one of our executive deputies overseeing all of the institutions. It's kind of interesting how things turn out.

Varner. Yes.

McNaughton: I definitely had to talk to you about Huntingdon. I also heard there were some incidents at Rockview as well. So, I have to reach out to Rockview staff as well. But I think it's a good thing that you were where you were at the time, because it just really sounded under complete control really, especially compared to Camp Hill. There was a lot of communication issues and just a lot of different warning signs. It just seems like Huntingdon was so much better handled. So, Thank you for that.

Varner: That comes from experience. Being that many years on that shift... you get a feel for things. Twice before I was right in the middle of it. One time as a sergeant, a bunch of inmates thought they were going to take over the prison and they rushed the C Block grill. That night, to save the whole prison, I ended up having to shut the grill with the officers on the inside. We lost an officer that night that was never able to come back to work... his whole side of his face was caved in and a couple of the officers... I'm on one side of the grill, and they're on the other side, and they're getting beat up. So, I made up my mind that if I ever got into a position that... they're not going to beat up on the officers. We'll lose a cell block, and we'll take it back, but we won't lose the whole prison, and I'm not going to let my guys get hurt.

Sure enough the next year, the same thing... the incident with the inmate that had AIDS, that they were all upset with, they thought that they were going to come up around the front of the block with their clubs and beat the officers... and they didn't have anybody... they did about \$40,000 to \$50,000 damage to the block, but we didn't get any officers hurt that night.

McNaughton: Thank goodness. Is there anything else you wanted to mention about this incident?

Varner: The officers did a fantastic job. And getting right back in there and taking it back as soon as we could... keeping it as small as we could and being prepared... I think that's what kept it to a minimum.

McNaughton: Thank you.

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