

## Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Bernard “Bernie” Comiskey  
Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots**  
Interview Date: September 16, 2019  
Interviewer: DOC Communications Director Susan McNaughton

### **Interview Transcript**

**McNaughton:** Welcome to the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections’ Oral History Project where we are recording the oral histories of current and former DOC employees. I’m DOC Communications Director Susan McNaughton. This oral history focuses on memories from the October 1989 riot at the State Correctional Institution at Camp Hill. Our guest today, September 16, 2019, is Bernard Comiskey. Thank you for joining us, Bernie.

**Comiskey:** Glad to be here.

**McNaughton:** Before we begin, could you please provide us with a brief overview of your DOC career.

**Comiskey:** I was hired by SCI Camp Hill in March 1989 as a drug and alcohol treatment specialist 2. I was assigned to work in the New Values Therapeutic Community (TC). A few years later I was promoted to drug and alcohol supervisor, and approximately 10 years ago I was promoted to drug and alcohol treatment manager at Camp Hill.

**McNaughton:** Now on to the Camp Hill riot. It is Wednesday, October 25, 1989, at around 2:30 p.m. Where are you, and what’s happening?

**Comiskey:** At that time, we were doing groups with the TC participants. The way it was set up is there was a recovery unit trailer, a New Values trailer, and then there was an office trailer where our offices were in, and the group rooms were in that trailer. We were doing groups in that room. We usually run groups until about 3 o’clock ... like from 1:30 to 3-ish.

At some point shortly before the group was over, my supervisor came to me and said, “We’re not going to release the inmates to go back to the housing unit. Just keep them in place.” So, I went back into the group room and I told the guys in the program, “Listen, we’re not going to send you back to the housing unit right now. Just sit here and relax and take it easy.” I was out in the hallway observing them, because my office was just across the hallway. What happened was



**Bernie Comiskey**

staff in our other unit could actually see what was going on. We knew there was a riot. We knew there was an occurrence over by E Gate. They just called on the phone and told staff what was going on down in our trailer. Obviously, you didn't want the inmates to know, so we stayed in the hallway. We had the inmates in there.

I remember going back into the room, and I scrounged up some magazines and I gave them to the guys. There were probably 15 to 20 inmates in that group room. I said, "Here are some magazines. You can sit back, read them awhile." There was no smoking in the trailer, however that day, I said, "If you've got cigarettes and you want to smoke, go ahead – there's windows you can slide open. Just smoke by the windows. Go ahead." They would ask some questions as to what was going on, and you were kind of intentionally evasive because you didn't want them to know. So, we would say, "Just relax, we'll get you out of here soon." They were fine.

Then we kept getting phone calls. One phone call came back and said, "Well, they are rioting in mod 1." You could see mod 1 from the one trailer. And then a few minutes later they'd call back, "They're rioting in mod 2." And now the riot's in mod 3, and then you heard the riot's in mod 4, and, at that point there was a road separating mod 4 from the drug and alcohol trailer, so we were kind of next in line.

I remember, in my office I could look out the window, and I could see the perimeter. I saw the state police lined up around the perimeter of the institution, but they weren't coming in. I remember thinking to myself, "Hey, come on in. We're ready for you to come in now."

Eventually they did come in before it crossed over [the road] to the drug and alcohol unit. It was a group of some of our CERT teams, some state troopers. There were some counselors in there. I remember a counselor named Tom James was there with helmets and they had a flack jacket and batons. They came down to our unit.

We got the inmates out of the unit. They escorted them... I'm not exactly sure where they took them. Once we swept the unit, we went out and we joined that group with the CERT team, and then we started moving up towards mods 1, 2 and 3.

When we got up to mods 1, 2 and 3, I remember most of the members in that group had equipment... a helmet, a baton, whatever. They were sort of pushing forward, heading towards E Gate. We didn't, because we were just coming out of groups.

There was an inmate there... an older inmate was having chest pains or something to that effect... they thought he was having a heart attack. They had us, because we didn't have equipment, take him on a stretcher down to medical. So, we took him down... I believe it was close to the rear gate where they had some medical for inmates. They didn't go outside the prison, but they had medical attention there. We took him down there for attention, and then that took a couple of minutes.

Then we asked, "Where would you like us to go now? Do you want us to go back with the group?" They probably didn't want us individually going back with the group ... we didn't have equipment anyhow, so they said, "Go out through the rear gate. Surround the perimeter."

So, then we were outside the perimeter... where our superintendent's office is... and that's where I stood. And you just stood and observed and watched for things. You really couldn't see much from that perspective, because it [the main rioting] was over on the back of the jail. It was pretty much a perimeter group and a show of force. Then after that, it seemed like we were standing there forever.

Then, it was probably 11:30 [p.m.], around there, when they had us come inside the institution, and we went up to Deputy Henry's office, which was above control. I was there with my supervisor, Kurt Kressler, and he wanted us to go over to the blocks. They had all of the inmates secure in the blocks. There were multiple inmates in cells, but they were supposedly locked in. We had to check to see if they were injured and if they needed medication and what their needs were.

**McNaughton:** How did you feel while you were doing that?

**Comiskey:** I was young. I was inexperienced. I was probably stupid. I wasn't thrilled with it, but I figured they knew what they were doing, and it needed to be done. I remember going over to the blocks, and it was probably after midnight when we got over there... I think I was on E and F Blocks... and we walked in and [went] to the cells.

At that time the blocks were a mess. The tiers were trashed with trash. [There was] a lot of water on the floor. They must have flooded the cells or whatever. I do remember walking down the tiers and some of the inmates were sleeping, and I really didn't like the idea of waking them up, because they didn't want to be woken up. They had to wake everyone up [and ask them], "Were you injured? Are you on medication? Do you need any medication?" Then you had to take all that information.



A flooded cell block.

We went down the tier. There was virtually no lighting, because I think they smashed all the lightbulbs out of the lights. There were emergency lights on, so it was very dimly lit. So, you're walking down... there's a lot of fluids... you would see some fluids dripping from the upper tier when you're walking on the lower tier, and you told yourself it was water, but you weren't sure. When you got to the end of that tier, it was a very eerie feeling. It was like something out of a movie. It was just very quiet, very eerie. Poorly lit... you're walking through water.

After we got the names of the inmates that needed things, then we went back to Deputy Henry's area. We gave them the names, and I assume they gave them to medical.

Probably about 2:30 or 3 o'clock in the morning, they said we could leave. I remember asking my supervisor, "What time do you want us back?" He said, "Come back at your normal reporting time," which was 8 in the morning. I live about 50 miles away in Lebanon County near Fort Indiantown Gap, so by the time you get home and get a shower, it would be about an hour or two until you had to get up. It had to be done and everyone knew that, and nobody had an issue with it.

We came back in the next morning... probably around 8 o'clock. I worked that whole day. A lot of it was [spent] walking around the institution. There was a lot of trash. A lot of carpentry equipment laying around... hammers... screwdrivers... circular sawblades... that kind of stuff. You did a little cleaning up. You went down and looked at your unit where the drug and alcohol guys were, to make sure everything was ok there. Then... my quit time was 4:30... we might have worked a little bit later. I remember my supervisor, Mr. Kressler, said, "Well, we have to have some people stay back for feeding, but I'm going to stay back ... why don't you guys go home and get some sleep and I'll stay back." So, I went home.

I remember getting to the house... it was dark. At that time, you always had the TV on for the news coverage all over. So, you walk in the house and the TV was on. I sat down, I was making a sandwich, and I hear this news broadcast about the Camp Hill riots. I said to myself, "Yeah, ok, I know." Then all of a sudden, I looked up and I saw there was stuff that was on fire that wasn't on fire [previously], and it didn't make sense to me. I'm thinking, "Wait a minute, they're just rebroadcasting all the news events from yesterday." Then I realized, after the news broadcast at 6 o'clock, I believe they started rioting again. So, when I noticed that, I knew my supervisor was there and everything. So, I immediately jumped in my car and went speeding back.

I do remember ... it was a nice drive because you could do like 85/90 [mph], and you had your ID on you, and you knew there were no troopers out, because they're all over at Camp Hill. I remember flying back...

**McNaughton:** Tell me what you were seeing as you were driving back. What could you see?

**Comiskey:** When I got off at the Cedar Cliff Mall Exit... when you turn on Lisburn Road, there was a roadblock with state troopers. You showed them your ID and they permitted you to go through. I remember as I was pulling up toward the prison, basically all you could see was fire all over the place... a lot of smoke... you could smell it. I remember when I got there, you

couldn't get to the parking lot to park because everything was packed with emergency vehicles and everything. I do remember I parked in Superintendent Freeman's front yard.



**The red car at the right, near the speed limit sign, is Bernie Comiskey's car.**

Then... I went over to where our superintendent's office was and asked them what they wanted me to do. They said, "Go down to the basement and get a firearm." By the time I had gotten there they had issued all of the firearms. There weren't any firearms left. So, they gave me a riot baton. Then they said, "Alright, you're going to be on the perimeter for now." They sent me up for perimeter coverage outside the fence up by the old Central Office Building. We were up there watching from that vantage point.



**This would have been the area where Bernie Comiskey helped to support the prison's perimeter.**

There was a lot of inmate activity, because you were directly in front of Group 2 and 3, where most of the activity was. You could see a lot of inmates coming out. There was a lot of yelling... screaming... setting little fires in the middle of the courtyard. They were always fairly covered up, so you couldn't tell who they were. They would come at the fence screaming at you and yelling all sorts of stuff. But you couldn't tell [who they were] because they had their hoods up... they had their face covered with a towel... I do remember sitting there thinking, "Maybe if I just looked and recognized a pair of sneakers ... or just certain people walk a certain way... maybe I could get an idea of what inmate was yelling." But, I really couldn't.

I remember, part way through the night, they came up and started taking wood out of the wood shop. The carpenter shop was inside the institution. They were propping these boards up against the fence, either to protect them or to block our vision. It was a painstaking effort to put all this wood up against the fence. Then they'd still be yelling at you. We just stood there and observed.

I remember when they started to come in for the assault to take that area back... there were shots fired, and as we were standing up there, you could hear things hitting the fence and the asphalt in front of you. So, I remember myself and Mr. Kressler ran behind the dumpster that was behind there [behind Central Office] until they stopped shooting, because you could hear things pinging around and you didn't want to get hit. Then they did the skirmish line and came up and started to bring the inmates out of the blocks.

**McNaughton:** And that was early Friday morning?

**Comiskey:** Yes. Thursday night was when I was outside the institution watching that, and then early Friday morning... the sun was just coming up. There was a bit of a misty-type fog... it always seemed nicer in the daylight there... you always felt better. When you saw them [the state police, etc.] coming up, it actually started to feel like you were starting to get control back of the jail. Then the inmates would start crawling out.

There was an officer/counselor there named Hal Mauer, who I believe might have been on K Block... I remember Mr. Kressler saying, "That looks like Hal Mauer." But they had him dressed in inmate clothing. I didn't know Hal that well, because I wasn't there that long, but then they secured everybody.

Then they escorted them... I wasn't sure where they were taking them, because... to me... it would make sense -- since those guys were really involved in the riot -- you wouldn't want to mix them in with the other inmates that weren't involved in the riot. So, I don't know if they took them down to the same athletic field and kept them separate or not. I don't know, I just saw them escorting them out.

**McNaughton:** Wow. Then, when did you go home after that?

**Comiskey:** We were there for a while. It was later in the morning, early afternoon.

**McNaughton:** That same day?

**Comiskey:** Yes.

**McNaughton:** Then after that, the focus of the institution was getting the inmates out to other facilities. Did you play a role in that at all?

**Comiskey:** The initial focus was just getting the cells cleared so we could get them [the inmates] out of the yard.

So, the next day, almost everybody worked together. There was a sense of camaraderie, where maintenance, counselors, drug and alcohol... everybody's doing the same thing... activities director... Terry Bluge... he and I were paired together for a while, and all we did was go into the cell blocks and literally just threw everything out of the cells. We weren't trying to save or package anything. If they were [housed] upstairs, we threw it over the rail onto the tier... get it all cleaned out of the cell... then security would come in and inspect the cells... make sure there's no weapons. We had thousands of inmates out in the yard, and you had to get them in because it was nice weather then, but it was the end of October.

I remember there would be stacks a couple feet high of TVs, blankets, personal property... There were situations where I think the inmates might have known that was going to happen, and someone said they found a stinger in a bucket of water... where if you would have grabbed it [you would have been electrocuted]... I never encountered any of that, but I remember someone telling me that.

**McNaughton:** Of course, some of the cells, even after they were cleaned out, they weren't able to be occupied because they just weren't secure or had holes in the walls.

**Comiskey:** Right, or there'd be plumbing... you could pull the drain thing out and it would be a weapon or whatever. So, our goal was to just get everything cleared out of it, so they could come in and do the cell searches. So, eventually, we could get the inmates back in the cells.

**McNaughton:** Tell me... the second night... the modulars burned, except for the New Values one.

**Comiskey:** Yes.

**McNaughton:** What was that like for you?

**Comiskey:** That was probably part of all the fire and smoke I saw when I was coming in.

The next day we went into the cells and you saw how much damage there was, you couldn't fathom the amount of damage.

The New Values Community... the inmates in there, from my understanding, actually fought some of the rioters off. There was an officer assigned to that unit... which was a dormitory-type setting... and the officer's desk was just at the front of the dorm, so you were sitting there with them all of the time. I believe it was Officer Freeman, and I think they put him in inmate's clothes and they got him out. So, basically, they kind of saved him.

And they fought off the rioters. I heard that they had all these buckets of water by the windows, and they had towels and stuff and they put ... water up against the windows so they [the rioting inmates] couldn't throw stuff in... because, what I was told by the inmates was... the inmates

who were rioting were telling them, “You better come out and join us or we’re going to burn your trailer down.” They were fighting them off and had buckets of water and things like that and put them up against the windows. To me it seemed like they did what they were supposed to do.

**McNaughton:** Looking back... that first day when you were handing out the magazines to them... they knew what was happening... did they know what was coming, and did they ever warn anybody?

**Comiskey:** Well, the thing with the TCU... it’s an isolated area. Those guys... the only interaction they had with inmates would be at mainline and yard, but the rest of the day they were always in TC activities. Where the group rooms were, they really didn’t have a clear view of the fence. They might have had an obstructed view. So, from my office which was on the other side, I could see clearly all of the state troopers out there. I don’t know whether or not they [the inmates] really saw them. They just seemed very calm. They seemed like, “Ok, we’ll sit here. Hey, they’re letting me smoke. They never let me smoke in here before... that’s ok.”

**McNaughton:** So, even with them going to mainline, they didn’t have any information?

**Comiskey:** To be honest... I don’t know. We did have some F.O.I. [Fruit Of Islam] inmates in the TC. Nobody expressed it to anybody that I know of. But they seemed fairly calm. I do know that when I came in the next day... when the modular units were burned down... mod 8 was the only modular unit... which was the TC... that wasn’t burned, but I noticed my office building was burned down.

I remember seeing a picture in the Patriot-News with... a picture of my desk and there was a pre-parole [form] melted right on it [the desk]. The guy [inmate] was asking me after that, “Where’s my pre-parole?” I said, “It was on my desk when this all happened.” Then I saw this picture, and the paper was literally melted on the desk, and the whole building was gone. I do remember that. That made it hit home a little bit.

**McNaughton:** Tell me about what you know about the rebuilding and Superintendent Beard then coming in to help rebuild.

**Comiskey:** The rebuilding... they did it well. It’s much better now. It’s compartmentalized.

When I started, we worked two evenings... so three daylight shifts, two evening shifts.

I remember in the evening shift inmates were allowed to wear street clothing, so you couldn’t really tell if they were a volunteer or an inmate sometimes. It was like a college campus. It was just wide open... grass was nice and green. I can remember walking across there thinking, “This is just like a college campus. It’s beautiful.” The buildings were nice-looking buildings, so it was very wide open.

Then after we stepped down, we cleaned the cells, they started putting the inmates back in, the next thing we did... we worked 12-hour shifts... I remember I made an awful lot of TV dinners, because that’s what we were feeding them.

There'd be four or six inmates in a cell. You had to be very careful, because if you gave one roast beef TV dinner in a cell and five chicken [dinners], when they'd been getting chicken all of the time, it would stir things up because they would argue or fight over who gets the roast beef. If you were aware of that, we'd get a bunch of chicken, and we'd serve them first and roast beef later. It seemed like that's all we did... make TV dinners for a long time.

For a while there, we were on the phones manning calls from inmates' families asking about the inmates. We did that for a little bit.

Then, when they started stepping down... it was a long, gradual process. The drug and alcohol program was probably the first part of the step down. We were all assigned... they moved all of our inmates to E Block. Gates were all chained and there'd be four or five guys in a cell... but all of the TC guys were together.

When they started the step-down process, they [the TC inmates] were the first ones that they started to gradually let out. I remember, at the beginning, the only place that we could do groups was over in the chapel. We were only allowed to move five inmates at a time. They'd handcuff them, and they'd have two CO's with nightsticks escorting us and five inmates over to chapel. They'd stay cuffed in the groups, and the CO's would stay there. Then they would escort them back. That was the start of the gradual step down. There was probably a lot of anxiety about it. I'm not sure everyone wanted to see the inmates out again, but it started out very structured. Then it went up to 10 inmates, and eventually we could escort them by ourselves without the CO's. Then, eventually, they didn't have to wear handcuffs. It gradually kept stepping down.

**McNaughton:** Same thing with the state police presence... a stepping down.

**Comiskey:** Yes. You'd see state troopers on the blocks all the time. And they would sit up toward the front of the block... sitting there with their shotguns.

**McNaughton:** Oh, really?

**Comiskey:** They had guns initially in there, but afterwards they didn't. There was always an issue of keys... a lot of keys missing... so there was concern about that.

**McNaughton:** When the state police were finally leaving... I bet that was a little nerve wracking for the employees.

**Comiskey:** They were... they [the state police] were there for a long time though. I remember a lot of them retired shortly after that. They were there for a fair share of time and we were starting to step things down.

**McNaughton:** Did you have a debriefing at all?

**Comiskey:** We did have a debriefing.

**McNaughton:** And what was that like?

**Comiskey:** It didn't go well. There's a psychologist named Dr. Josephson, who ran our debriefing. He started off asking, "Well, how do you feel?" That just... everything went out

there, and there was an awful lot of frustration with the administration... they either didn't do enough or they knew what was going on. Staff felt betrayed. Some staff felt like they were put in situations where their life was in jeopardy. So, there was an awful lot of frustration... some anger. It didn't last very long after that. So, they just stopped it after that. I'm not too sure the debriefings were that effective.

**McNaughton:** Right. Did you have any stress show itself to you through nightmares or anything like that? How did it impact you?

**Comiskey:** I really probably didn't understand PTSD, but now I think I have a little bit better understanding. The things that got me were the sounds of helicopters, the smell of things burning and, actually, I got tired of pizza, because... it was very nice of Domino's to provide pizza for several weeks, but if you're working 12-hour shifts and you start eating pizza two three times a day, there is too much of a good thing. You just got tired of pizza, so when I see pizza, I think of the riot.

Probably the smell of things burning every so often make you think of the riot.

I live close enough to the Gap [Ft. Indiantown Gap], that when they would do their drills with the helicopters... especially early in the morning and on weekends when I'd be sleeping... when I'd hear that helicopter flying low over my house, I know I'd jump up startled. It's probably the sound of helicopters was probably the longest one, because they were flying around the duration of the riot.

My supervisor, Mr. Kressler, he stayed back to feed. I remember talking to him the next day, and he was telling me they opened up the block doors to take food in and there's inmates running around the block and then they took off running. I guess a truck was starting to move and he [Mr. Kressler] said, "I was running trying to catch up to the truck. I just jumped on the back of it." And then he went over and was trapped in control with a group of people. They used all of their belts to get weapons up and down. The state police came in when Sgt. Beck allowed them to come in. They came in and pretty much saved him. I remember him telling me that story. I thanked him for not making me work that night.

**McNaughton:** Is there anything else that you wanted to share?

**Comiskey:** The only other thing I can think of is... after the riot, when they were bringing charges against some of the inmates... I remember I got subpoenaed, and I couldn't figure out for the life of me why they were subpoenaing me ... I had to testify for an inmate. I never got the inmate's name. I thought, "What do they want me to do this for?"

You have to honor a subpoena, so I went down to the courthouse, and this attorney came out and said, "I'm representing [this inmate] and he's been charged with the riot and assaulting CO Arnold [who was beaten very badly], and I want you to testify on behalf of the inmate." I looked at him and said, "I don't understand what you're talking about." He said, "Well, one inmate that was in your TC program is turning state's evidence." This particular inmate... my gut feeling is that he probably might have been involved in the riot and maybe he's turning state's evidence to reduce his charges... he was an F.O.I. inmate. He was very radical when he was in the TC.

I remember him [the inmate] saying I was a blue-eyed devil, because I had blue eyes, and if I gave him treatment, it was because he was an F.O.I. and all this stuff. He eventually was removed from the program because he wasn't complying at all and was very disruptive. So, he got removed from the program.

He [the attorney] said, "Well, this inmate is testifying stating that he saw my client assault Arnold. I want to put you on the stand. You were his counselor, weren't you?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "I want to put you on the stand... did you kick him out of the TC program." I said, "Yes, we did." He said, "I want to put you on the stand because we want to attack his credibility."

I really had no desire to testify for an inmate, particularly against Arnold. He really was brutalized. I said, "I don't think you really want to put me on the stand." He said, "Yes, I am. You said you kicked him out. I want to attack his credibility." I remember saying, "Well, I'd probably be a hostile witness, but if you put me on the stand, the one thing I will tell you is while the inmate was a terrible inmate... he was very disruptive... part of the problem that he got removed, is that he never lied to me. He would just tell me right up front that he hated my guts. He never lied to me. So, I really can't challenge his credibility because he was always very honest with me."

Turns out that I sat out in the lobby the entire day and he never called me, and that was the end of that. They were trying to find ways... I remember that I thought it was very unusual that I would be subpoenaed for an inmate that I had never heard of.

**McNaughton:** Amazing.

**Comiskey:** It was.

**McNaughton:** Any other interesting stories or memories?

**Comiskey:** I'm sure there's tons of them but I can't remember any at the moment. Just the camaraderie... I thought that was important too. When I started there, Mr. Kressler was phenomenal. I'm the mentor coordinator now, and I always tell people, "We always had mentoring programs. It was just unofficial." Mr. Kressler took me under his wing. During the riot, I just followed him around, because he knew the jail and I felt comfortable following him around, and I remember hanging out with him... getting a lot of information from him. He sort of taught me everything I know. He went through a lot during the riot and we remain good friends. There was a story there, but I lost it.

**McNaughton:** That's ok. Bernie, I want to thank you for participating in this.

**Comiskey:** It was a pleasure. I'll be interested to read the article.

END