

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Bernie Venesky
Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots**
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Interviewer: DOC Communications Director Susan McNaughton

Interview Transcript

McNaughton: Welcome to the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' Oral History Project where we record the oral histories of current and former DOC employees. I'm DOC Communications Director Susan McNaughton. Our guest today, September 9, 2019, is Bernie Venesky. Thank you for joining us, Bernie.

Venesky: Thank you.

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

Venesky: I started at SCI Camp Hill in January 1985. I was employed there into 1990, when I took a transfer after the riot. I went to SCI Frackville, and finished my career after 20 years... I retired as a lieutenant.



Bernie Venesky

McNaughton: Thank you. Tell me where you were around 2:30/3 p.m. on Wednesday, October 25, 1989.

Venesky: Sure, I was the sergeant on E and F Blocks... they had one sergeant for two blocks. It was something new that they were experimenting with at the time. I actually was on F Block, and I remember vividly, because there was a new reception [inmate] that just came over. I remember the younger inmate. He was in for a second DUI and he had some serious state time, because he ended up wrecking into the wife of a judge, so they slapped him with some hard time. I moved him in and he was kind of scared and he said, "Sarge, what kind of a place is this?" I said, "You know, with your time in the county, you don't really have much time left. Just keep your nose clean. Watch who you deal with, and you'll be ok. You'll be out of here in a couple of months."

Forty-five minutes later is when the riot broke out.

I was done moving this inmate in, and I was back in a little closet that doubled as a sergeant's office where extra browns and toiletries for the inmates ... I went back to finish up some paperwork, and I had an inmate worker out sweeping up the day room for nighttime block out.

The inmate said something about, "Hey, Sarge, someone just got hit out there." So, I'm actually standing at the window of the F Block day room with the inmate and saw some other inmates running, and I looked at the inmate and told him to go back to his cell and lock up.

I then went out to my officers on the block who were Randy Wright and Tabb Bickell. I asked them what was going on, and they said, "We got an order over the radio to secure the front doors." So, I looked at both officers and I said, "What we're going to do is stick together, do the downstairs and then the upstairs, go pull doors, I'll man the front, and just make sure everything is secure in the block." I said, "Don't leave each other's side."

I no sooner said that than Bernie Bubba Baker came on the radio and said, "16 to all units, open the doors and get your inmates in." I remember looking at Tabb and Randy and saying, "Let me find out what's going on. Get these inmates in. Don't push showers. Just get them locked up until we figure out what's going on."

I stepped outside the cell block. Took my hat, stepped outside. I got about probably 20 feet from the door and all hell broke loose. [There was some background noise here.]

I turned, and Tabb Bickell was holding the door open and yelled, "Sarge, Come on!" And there was already probably a dozen or so inmates between me and him. I ordered him to lock the door. I said, "I'll find another way out." So, he closed the door.

I turned... I don't really remember this happening... I was told by the officer in the tower, later on, that I was jumped by three inmates. I remember getting knocked down from behind, and when I looked up I saw one of our trainees had been hit and dropped to a knee by an inmate... as he turned to get away, the inmate followed him around and hit him a second time... and the trainee fell unconscious. For the love of me, I can't ... I can't remember his name.

But I got up, and I scrambled over to him and I remember looking down, and he was just... his head was in a pool of blood. I shook him and got no response. He was out. I literally picked him up by the shirt collar and then by his belt and I stood up and I started running with him down the hill towards E Gate, because being a little bit higher up by F Block, I could see that the inmates were working their way behind the officers that cut them off from getting out.

As I was going down, the officer actually came to and was trying to run with me and said, "Sarge, Sarge, I can't see, just hold on to me I can run." So, I took him by the arm and I got down and I yelled to everyone, "Let's get the f*ck out of here." We scrambled through the gate house, secured the smaller gate and tried to make a stand. I know E Block got caught with the front door open.

Somehow, I'm not sure how, inmates had gotten into the kitchen area – and there was a remodeling project going on – key and tool control wasn't what it was years later... and there

were lock boxes in there with tools, and the inmates came out with some of these tools. Several times they charged at the gate.

We were trying to ... they were throwing boards at us, some broken benches... try to push them back and keep them from breaking through.

An inmate took a pry bar... a 6-foot pry bar... shoved it through the fence and just missed my chest. I turned, and he just missed my chest. He pulled it back through... and when he pulled it back through, he put it up over his head and there was a single chain holding a double gate. He rammed it down through the chain, and several of us at the same time realized he was going to bust the chain. There was no way to stop him. We were outnumbered like 9 or 10 officers to 400 and some inmates roughly that we guesstimated were coming back from yard.

A couple of us at the same time said, "Let's get out of here." We turned and started to sprint toward main control.

To this day, I firmly, firmly believe the only reason we didn't get trapped down or run down by those inmates... some were coming after us, but there's also a group that figured this was going to be a long-haul event, and they cut toward the commissary... and there was like a jumble at the gate there. Two groups of inmates wanting to go different directions. It was a few seconds delay to give us a few extra feet between us.

We made it in main control... security doors behind us. I remember a good friend of mine, Thomas James, who was a counselor where I ran mod 6... a real good friend of mine, we saw each other. We gave each other a big hug, asked each other if we were ok. Word came out... we were given some extra riot batons that were stored in the rear main control. We went up to Group 1 side to the dispensary and there's a stairwell that went down into the visiting room... so we went down to the visiting room and we set up a skirmish line and we evacuated main control and everyone we could out through the visiting room gate house outside the fence. We got them out, and now this is already probably... there was already a bus from state police academy showing up with some of the state policemen. We went into the armory... out back there was another area that had riot gear and we suited up and we reentered the jail with the state police. We came in through the rear gate and we went through the mods first. Secured all the mods. Evacuated all of the inmates out onto the ball field. Worked our way across, and pushed back, secured everything up until the original gatehouse where the incident started at.

McNaughton: E Gate.

Venesky: At that time, they brought out some hostages, and that when the negotiations started. I went kind of blank there for a while, I mean, we were going full tilt. The next thing I know, I'm in the triage area being treated and eventually, after a little while there, being taken to Holy Spirit hospital.

McNaughton: What was your injury?

Venesky: I think it was just exhaustion. They told me I had tachycardia, which was a racing heartbeat. I did have an injury to my lower back. They assumed I got hit with something when I

was jumped up in the main compound when the incident first took off. I think it was just... pardon my French... going balls to the walls for that period of time to get everything secured. I sort of remember someone helping me. I think I more or less came [to] when they stuck the needle in to give me the IV... is when it sort of woke me up more and realized what was going on.

McNaughton: Wow. How long were you in the hospital?

Venesky: I was actually cleared that night, and I went home. I did... I stayed at the hospital because they were bringing more in and I got to meet up with Tabb Bickell, who was my officer and checked with him. He was one that they brought over the Holy Spirit. We chatted for a few minutes, and I got a message to his fiancé that he was ok and was being checked out. I went back to the jail. They gave me a quick debriefing, and they told me to take a couple of days off and let them know how I was doing.

The next evening, I was here at the fire company. People were talking to me and we were working on the engine. People were asking me different things, and our bartender upstairs came down ... and he said, "Linda just called... that they called Chris back in. The riot started again."

I said, "I don't know... I gotta be there." I went home, grabbed my things and drove back down from Shamokin back down to Camp Hill, and I spent the next 36 hours on the perimeter. Then I was able to go in after the state police entered and stuff and had everything secured. I went in and did escort duty for a while.

After that... after I got home. I called back to a lieutenant, and he said, "We're doing 12-hours shifts. You're going to be on 6 at night until 6 in the morning." I said, "Ok, sir." He said, "Report back in and you'll get your assignment." I said, "Alright, I'll be back in tomorrow morning." I went back the next day and I worked overnight. I got home. It's usually about an hour-and-a-half drive home for me from there... back to Shamokin. As I was going upstairs, my wife answered the phone. It was the psychiatrist from the institution, and ... he told me that he didn't want me going back until he saw me. I said, "Well, I'm ok. I need to get back to work." He said, "No. No. You're too anxious." He gave me 30 days off or something like that. So, I called back in, and I told the captain and explained to him what had happened. He said, "Ok. I'll mark you off, and let us know." So, it came close to my time to go back to work and I called down and made an appointment. My appointment with the psychiatrist was at the administration building of SCI Camp Hill. My appointment was at 10 in the morning. I got there a little bit early. I waited and waited. I didn't have breakfast.. I drove all the way down, and lunchtime came, and I called in and a friend of mine who was a nurse, Joanie Campbell, answered and said, "He's still down at the hole and he talking to inmates." I said, "Ok, well let me know, Joanie." I waited another hour and a half and now it was close to almost 3 o'clock. I called back in and talked to Joanie, she said, "Bernie, He's still not back." I said, "Well, I've been here all day and I haven't eaten yet. With the rush-hour traffic, I'm going to go back. Just tell him I'll call him and reschedule." So, I called in to reschedule and he told me that now I was too impatient, and I wouldn't wait for him and he gave me another 30 days.

McNaughton: Oh my goodness.

Venesky: It was absurd, and it was hurting me psychologically to be off. I needed... just like to get back on the horse, I needed to get back in and know I could do this. I made a phone call to find out what openings were available elsewhere, and a records position was open at Frackville. I went there. I was only supposed to be in a little less than a year until they had an opening for an officer, but the records supervisor ended up falling and had to have major surgery. So, they filed me an extension without penalizing me, and I stayed on for a little bit longer, and then I went back into uniform and retook the test and got my stripes back on and eventually made lieutenant.

McNaughton: Whew. Wow. Did you ever then have a real debriefing after that?

Venesky: We had... there was one attempt at a group debriefing and it didn't go very well, with several of the officers that were even involved more so than I with the riot, because the person that came in... the psychologist or whatever... at some point said, "You have to look at it from the inmate's point of view." Two of the officers lunged over the table at him.

McNaughton: One was Gere Kostelac.

Venesky: Gere is godparent for my oldest daughter.

McNaughton: I interviewed Gere and he told me that story.

Venesky: I'm glad you said that, because I wasn't going to say that, but yes. Gere is godfather for my youngest daughter, and his wife is godmother for my oldest.

McNaughton: He did say that the debriefing was pretty much useless.

Venesky: They sent me... during that time I was off, they sent me down to a place called Psychological Services in Sunbury, and I mean... do I think it helped? I don't know. I'm not putting anyone at fault for anything, but I don't think it was the kind of talking or therapy I needed. If that make sense. It just didn't... I was grateful for it, but it wasn't exactly what I needed and all. I mean, to this day, I ... when I go to a restaurant, I sit with my back to the wall. I do have... they told me I have PTSD from it, but I'm not like anything violent. I'm not just saying that to say I have that. Certain things make me remember things. I remember every word and every step I took that day.

McNaughton: I just have to say that I did interview Tabb Bickell, and he told me about his situation, and I said, "So, when did you go back to work." And he said, "I went back that night." And he was there the next day. I just find it interesting how he was trapped in the switchboxes with the inmates trying to electrocute him and the psychologist didn't stop him from going back to work.

Venesky: I don't know how... I will say this... I have no proof of this, this is only hearsay and rumor going around... and by keeping us off and this psychiatrist was charging the state for interviews. So, if we would call in and talk to him about going back to work, he would consider that an interview, ask us a few questions and then charge the state. Again, I don't know... I went back that night. They told me to take a day off 'cause of my lower back pain. I called right away. I needed to go back in. I couldn't let the inmates think they won. That was my mentality at the time.

McNaughton: Let's talk about some of the sights and sounds. Afterwards, you said, for the second day... you were outside the perimeter. Where outside the perimeter would you have been situated?

Venesky: Right outside the... in between the main gate and at that time the department building.

McNaughton: Oh, Ok. Do you remember seeing the police special teams go in and rescue a hostage?

Venesky: I remember teams going in when they made their final assault. I did not see anything that I could recognize as a special team going in. I, more or less, saw the final push when they entered, and shots were fired. Then the inmates took cover... ran back in the cell blocks and all. When they pushed through the gate house. They had the double gates down there all barricaded. There were many fires going on in the compound. The helicopter was above with the spotlight on giving orders. There was another bull horn going on from someone shouting out orders and that kind of stuff. It was just... it was surreal. It was just like something out of a movie.

McNaughton: I know... I was there in central office watching from my office. I had a perfect view over the area where the six housing units were. The sound of the helicopters, that kind of triggered me for a while after that. The sound of the humming portable generator lights that were lighting up the perimeter. Did you feel the same way about helicopters and...

Venesky: Yeah. Especially because, being here in Shamokin, there's a helipad at the hospital. So, the helipad at Minersville... one there for Schuylkill County, and if they transport to Shamokin or Danville, they cross right over Shamokin every time. Yeah, even to this day, if I'm not ready for it, it might catch me off guard. I also notice I'm very much more observant of people walking in to a room if I'm at a restaurant or if I'm out with friends. I'm constantly watching body movement and what people are doing with their hands. It just... it's a constant. It just doesn't turn off.

McNaughton: Wow. Even 30 years later.

Venesky: 30 years later. Believe me, I'm no fighter. I'm no military guy or anything like that. It just doesn't turn off.

McNaughton: How old were you at the time?

Venesky: Twenty-six. I was only a sergeant for a hot eight months.

McNaughton: Tell me what some of the things were that caused the riot?

Venesky: I could tell you a little bit of a story... I still have the paperwork somewhere. About seven, eight weeks before the riot – actually because of this I had to testify down in Harrisburg because of this. We were running showers on E Block, and up on tier four, third cell back, I had the known secretary of the F.O.I. Fruits Of Islam. I saw inmates stop by. I was a sergeant, I would go down and relieve my guy to use the restroom or get a coffee, but I kept watching. It was unusual because not only did black inmates stop there, but several white inmates stopped to talk to him. He had a legal pad and was jotting down some stuff. As we were closing showers, I

called down to my lieutenant and asked if I could do a cell search. I told him what I saw. He authorized one and sent me a couple extra guys for after showers. After my officer did count I came up the tier behind him ... about two cells behind him with two extra officers. We got to the door, waved the arm and opened... the first thing the inmate did was take the tablet, throw it in a box and kick the box under the bed. So, that was the first thing we went for. He was running his mouth. On the list was a title, "What Must Be Done." There was a listing of different things... had to deal with family days, visitation, the overcrowding and other things. I did that report, made copies and turned it in. The reason I had to go down and testify was I guess the deputy superintendent didn't take action on anything or they didn't feel it was correctly investigated. I had to go down in front of Senator Greenleaf and the others to testify about these papers. Explaining how I came about finding them and all.

McNaughton: That sounded like a list of demands.

Venesky: It was. I found out afterward that I was on some kind of list that the inmates had, because of that, but thank God I made it out. There's a lot... I know there's changes that go about, and at that time being a young sergeant, I understood it, but the other thing I also understood was there were too many changes too swiftly, in my opinion. Changes for visiting and family day and they made changes in education and some other programs. I can't recall exactly which ones, but I just remember it just seemed like every week we'd get another handful of memos with different changes and you have to post them all. It was just... not... these guys get into a set routine, and they don't take the change well, especially when it's one after the other after the other. In my opinion, that was one of the things... everything contributed to it with the visiting thing and also the speed at which everything was being changed. There was no breathing room in between, to let things adjust.

McNaughton: And then, I wanted to ask you too... At about the same time, talk to me about staff morale. Everyone I talk to said staff morale was really bad... morale was really bad among staff. Talk to me about that.

Venesky: When you talk about morale, it's ... the staff themselves were tight-knit. They were brothers and sisters working a job and had each other's back. A lot of the morale problems came.. again, I feel... this is my opinion... because of the amount of changes that were going on, and everyone saw that. Everyone heard the bickering. Everyone heard the shouting on the cell blocks about what was going on, "That ain't f*cking cool!" We could feel it building. It wasn't morale with each other, it was morale because of... when I say administration I'm not saying the entire administration, because John Stover, the major... I would walk through hell with him or for him. He wouldn't have to go alone, I would go through it for him. He was... I felt that way about a lot of my uniform staff. I'm not putting down anything, I got along with many of the staff, but the speed of how fast these changes came about and not listening to the staff... it was falling on deaf ears. I, truly, to this day, in my opinion, again, that's just how I feel.

McNaughton: Sure. Tell me about the inmates on E Block. Because I hear... was that where the parole violators mostly were, and that parole violators were just kind of sitting around and were part of the problem too.

Venesky: There were changes going on. Parole violators got in there and they'd be waiting for the [parole board to make a decision on their violation – maybe take another program]. Although there was a variety of programs, because of the overcrowded situation as a whole in the jail, getting these inmates in... there were some lengthy waiting lists. Some of them waited several months for programs.

McNaughton: That's a long time for them to be sitting around, and I'm sure they were aware of all the grumbling and just kind of joined in.

Did you go back to Camp Hill for the 25th anniversary?

Venesky: No, I didn't know that they were having anything; however, I saw a shirt that they had advertised and were selling, and I reached out to get one. Someone sent me a shirt and I sent them a money order to pay for it. So, I have my anniversary shirt.

McNaughton: I know that they don't have a complete listing of individuals who were there at the time, so maybe through all of my interviews I can help them build that list back up.

I know that after you left Camp Hill, you said, in 1990 and went to Frackville and was there for 20 years, did you ever go back inside Camp Hill then? Have you seen it since it's been rebuilt?

Venesky: No. I did one transport after hours. We had an inmate on staff assault at Frackville and I ended up doing a transport down to Camp Hill. We went back to the rear gate to be processed in, and I looked up and I heard, "Ski." I looked up and it was Nate Hargrove, my officer from E Block.

McNaughton: Would you ever go back inside?

Venesky: Absolutely. I would absolutely go back inside. I think it would give me closure to say... pardon my French, "You know what, mother f*ckers, I'm back."

McNaughton: I guess my last question is what kind of advice would you give to current employees – whether officers or not – if they find themselves in a situation, what should they do?

Venesky: If they are in a riot situation?

McNaughton: Sure.

Venesky: I know they say about cooperating. If its on the onset of a riot? Fight like you are the third monkey getting on to Noah's Ark.

McNaughton: I don't mean to laugh at that, but that was funny. I understand. Somebody else, I'm not sure if it was Chip Rice or Gere Kostelac, said, "What you should do is run like hell. If you can't run, you should hide, but always try to get out."

Venesky: Yeah. Always try to get out the whole thing... if there's a way, if it's at the onset of an incident, get out. If you can grab a fellow staff member and help him or her get out, do the same thing, but fight like you're the third monkey trying to get on Noah's Ark. That's my advice.

Don't placate yourself. Over the course of time of a 20-year career, at one time there was always problems. Staff assaults over time and all of that. But I notice the lack of respect over the years toward staff with the younger inmates coming in. Some of the lifers would even say. I had one guy there... he would always call me boss. I said, "Let me ask you, why do you call me boss?" He said, "Because, where I came from, if you didn't, you knew about it." I said, "Ok, fair enough."

McNaughton: Is there anything else you remember that you wanted to share that we might have missed.

Venesky: Always keep your eyes open, even the smallest thing might mean something. Keep notes and watch each other's six. God forbid you have to go through something like we did back then, just do what you can to get out. We'll sort everything out later. That was a piece of advice from a captain at Frackville. My first time on the desk as a lieutenant, and he was going out to night yard. He said, "If that phone goes off, you do something. I might not be the right thing, but we'll sort it out later. But do something." I'll never forget that.

McNaughton: Great. Bernie, I want to thank you for participating in this, and I really appreciate it.

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