

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

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

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**Interview Transcript**

**McNaughton:** Welcome to the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' Oral History Project where record 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 26, 2019, is Bill Rhoades. Thanks for joining us, Bill.



**Rhoades:** You're welcome. Thank you.

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

**Rhoades:** I started back in 1989, basically six months before the riot. From there, after the riot, I became a CO1, and I worked in the RHU for years and then got promoted to sergeant in 1993 and then to a lieutenant in 1996. Then I was lieutenant for 22 years until I retired in 2018, doing pretty much every lieutenant job there is.

**McNaughton:** Your whole career was at SCI Camp Hill?

**Rhoades:** Yes.

**McNaughton:** Thank you. So, you were a COT at the time?

**Rhoades:** Yes, I was.

**McNaughton:** OK. Let me set the stage for you. It is around 2:30/3 o'clock on Wednesday, October 25, 1989. Where are you and what's happening?

**Rhoades:** I had just got home. I was on H Block that day. I was at my house getting stuff ready to go to the gym when we received an "All Call." I answered that. Got dressed immediately and headed back to the institution.

**McNaughton:** What time do you think you got back to the institution and what did you see when you arrived?

**Rhoades:** Ten to 15 minutes, and they sent us to the rear gate. I would say I got there probably around 3:10 [p.m.]. We got to the rear gate. They were holding people, trying to get organized. A fire truck went by and I knew a bunch of people were up there, so I jumped on the back of the fire truck and rode the fire truck up. At that time, I saw Lt. Jeffries. He was standing by the main field... the large field, and he had a flack jacket on, a helmet and a baton. I asked him, "Lt., are you going to use that?" He said, "No." So, I got his stuff and proceeded up to E Gate.

**McNaughton:** What was going on at E Gate when you got there, and you were on the Group 1 side of the gate rather than on the Group 2 and 3 side. Is that right?

**Rhoades:** Correct. Officers had just arrived there, and we were in a group. There was really no organization. The only thing that was going on is that they were stopping everybody from going in. We proceeded to stand there and watch officers kneeling down, being beaten on.

I remember, particularly, one instance where they brought Bud Atherton up close to the gate, and he had a rope around his neck, and a guy had a shank to his throat, and they proceeded to beat on him with a broomstick. I know we started yelling as a group, "Stop!" [We were yelling] even more so than we'd been yelling... than the other officers were beaten, but this was very extensive with the broom handle at that time.

**McNaughton:** That must have been very difficult standing there and really nothing [you could do]... just screaming through the fence.

**Rhoades:** It very much was. It's hard... I can say it's hard even now. When I see anything like that on TV, it's still hard.

**McNaughton:** How long did you stand there at the fence? There was a lot going on... go ahead.

**Rhoades:** We stood there... it seemed like forever. We watched them parade officers back and forth to our area. It started getting dark, and they had broken into the kitchen at that time. They started a bon fire and were cooking hot dogs and various items. We just stood there and watched.

**McNaughton:** Were the inmates from E Block pelting you with items? Were they throwing items at you while you were standing there? Do you remember that?

**Rhoades:** There were things being thrown out the window. I don't know exactly what they were, but they were throwing some... let me tell you this... there were some inmates that did help us along the way.

**McNaughton:** Ok. How did they help you... [by] providing information?

**Rhoades:** By providing information or actually helping officers who were hostages.

**McNaughton:** I know that, in some cases... and I talked to two hostages... they said that some of the inmates actually loosened the zip ties that were around their wrists because they were too tight. Is that what you had in mind when you were saying they were helping?

**Rhoades:** They helped some... they actually protected some officers. I know that for a fact with Officer Chapman. There were twin inmates... and they protected him because people were actually stabbing him.

**McNaughton:** I think, also that night, there were some people trapped in the music room up on the second story up above the kitchen area?

**Rhoades:** Correct. Yeah, we stood there and then all of a sudden, we heard yelling and it was coming from the roof, and I saw Gere Kostelac up there. I knew it was him, because I have known Gere for years and years out on the street. I actually talked to his father-in-law, Major Yucha, before I came over there and got the job.

**McNaughton:** Tell me what you saw... how did they rescue those people?

**Rhoades:** They brought a fire engine that had a ladder on it in and Joe Miller proceeded up the ladder and helped everybody off the roof and they made their way down. At that time Gere and the activities guy... he said the inmates had broken through the ceiling for them and helped them up onto the roof to protect them. I remember Gere saying that.

**McNaughton:** How did the rest of that night go for you?

**Rhoades:** Not too well. While we were standing there, there were inmates in the main field and they were throwing rocks. I remember a fire fighter take his helmet off to wipe his forehead, and he got hit with a big rock right in the head. That basically, unfortunately, is how the night went.

After that went down, we went to go back to the gate... not that we were far from the gate... we were basically right there watching everything. All of a sudden, the inmates started going back into the cell blocks. This is late. It's dark, and we had no idea why.

Then the next word we get is we're going to go into the cell blocks and walk the cell blocks and check every cell... pull every cell and secure them. We started doing that. I ended up at the end. I did it on purpose, because I trusted... I was with Joe Miller and Bud Cooney, and we were the last three out of the blocks. I knew Joe Miller. He was my training sergeant at the time.

At the end of... as we were walking down, there were a lot of the rod box covers were off, meaning that the inmates could just stick their hands up and pull on the wire and the cell doors would open. Other cell doors just wouldn't shut. So, when we were done walking each and every block, I remember hearing Bud and Joe tell that to the people present in the area, because as soon as we were clearing... well, as we were going down, I remember the original people leading the way... they were yelling at inmates to get back in their cells because people [inmates] were running back and forth, and as soon as we were clearing the block, there were people scurrying back and forth as we were leaving the block.

After that finished... we did all six blocks... they sent us into the kitchen. At that time, it was one big kitchen, so we were just sitting in there, and we got the word that we had to feed the inmates.

**McNaughton:** To feed the inmates, ok.

**Rhoades:** No one was happy, because we had stood there and watched the inmates raid the kitchen and eat. And then when people brought it [the food] across, we were actually told that those hamburgers were sent for staff. So, that made it even worse. It wasn't... people's frame of mind wasn't too well at that point.

**McNaughton:** So, the hamburgers that were supposed to go to staff... you had to feed to the inmates. Is that what you're saying?

**Rhoades:** Correct.

**McNaughton:** And I'm sure you were hungry, and they had been running around feeding themselves having a grand old time, and you had to feed the inmates.

**Rhoades:** Yes. We were ordered to feed the inmates.

**McNaughton:** Wow. How long did that take?

**Rhoades:** It took a long while, because, again, we had to clean our way as we were going, because inmates were running back and forth across the cell blocks. So, we're trying to be safe as we go, and it was a tough situation, but we got it done. It probably took a couple of hours because of the process.

**McNaughton:** The inmates... because some of the cells weren't able to contain inmates... you might have had six, eight inmates in a cell, right?

**Rhoades:** Yes. That happened... Actually, once it started, that never stopped. We had to... that was a common thing because some cells were literally destroyed inside, and we couldn't put people in there. So, we put multiple people in cells.

**McNaughton:** When you were done feeding the inmates, then what happened?

**Rhoades:** Again, we hung around, because they didn't know what to do, because we didn't have anyone to relieve us. After that, people started arriving from other institutions, and we... they started dismissing people throughout the day.

**McNaughton:** When did you finally get to go home, or did you go home?

**Rhoades:** Yes, I got to go home late morning. They told me to come back the next day unless I heard different. I went home. I got a couple hours of sleep, and then I remember distinctly... I went to... I referee football in the street, so I went to a referees' meeting in Steelton. I no sooner got to the referees' meeting and the news was on... they interrupted and said, "This is happening at Camp Hill."

So, I jumped in my car and headed back that way. I can remember screaming as I'm going... as I'm driving, "No! No! Not again! Not again!" Because I knew more people were going to get hurt, because as we were standing there the first night... officers were coming out and there were injuries and messed up and hurt and it wasn't a good sight to see. I walked a couple of them across [the prison to the main gate] myself. Thankfully they were walking and stuff like that, but it wasn't good.

I'm yelling as I drive there. I get there... park the car and run up and get a shotgun and pockets full of shells.

From what I understand, they had just gotten people out of control and upstairs because they were trying to burn them out. I think Joe Miller was involved with that again, and they helped get them down.

I can remember they had us stand by the gate in a group. We were watching as inmates were still running around, back and forth, and everything...

Another thing I forgot to mention is Bud Atherton's uncle, I can't remember his name, he had gotten stabbed in the stomach and he was outside G Block... it's going together [his memory is foggy]. I know that the state police had to rescue him. The state police went in and rescued him... up along the blocks. Yes, and got him out of there... their SERT team.

**McNaughton:** The guys dressed in all black.

**Rhodes:** Yes. I remember seeing them do that, because we watched them from the main gate go up and get him. That might have been the second night.

**McNaughton:** I know sometimes it blurs all together.

**Rhodes:** Exactly.

**McNaughton:** I do remember seeing the SERT team go along and get an inmate [meant to say employee]. I think they were in between the two perimeter fences... could have been somebody different. Is that what you recall?

**Rhodes:** Yes, that was ... I can't recall his name, but I can see him.

**McNaughton:** It was interesting that the inmates gave him up.

**Rhodes:** He was hiding there outside the block, laying like in the middle. I think he was in browns at that point, and he was laying there. I don't know how he got away. The inmates really didn't give him up. From what I heard, he got out there himself.

**McNaughton:** How terrifying.

**Rhodes:** And once he got in that area, he stayed put because he figured the tower was right there and people could help him, because that was basically right by the tower.

**McNaughton:** The second night, you're back inside and they've rescued the staff that was trapped above control. Then what did you do the rest of the night?

**Rhodes:** We were there watching. I know at one time we worked our way down and were standing and they were throwing Molotov cocktails off the roof of E Block and yelling and screaming. We had wandered up onto the grass area where the new mod is, and we had to move back and that's how we got back by control. I know we were standing there for a while.

We heard they were going to bring an officer out... that he has a broken back, we were told. So, from afar, because I'm right at the door of Zone 1... you could see inmates pushing a cart coming at us. They pushed it over by the end of E Block... I guess that's where they felt they were safe... somewhere in that area between the Ed Building doorway and the end of E... somewhere in that area. They parked it there and they ran off. Well, I'm standing there... looking around, and no one's moving. So, I handed the guy next to me my shotgun, and I took off running. As I'm running, I see something to my left, and it is Rocket Williams running from the main gate area. He beats me there, and I get there, and we proceed to bring Eckenrode out and take him to the main gate. They took him out.

We stood there, and I was there with Lorado Pyle, and we got told... don't ask me by who... to enter the RHU and check the RHU. So, we drew the keys... he and I... we had our shotguns with us... and we entered the RHU. We turned on the very front lights... the rest of them didn't seem to want to go on... and at that time we walked over by the desk, we were very weary of what was going on... and checked that tier. Then we noticed... on the desk... that someone had defecated on the desk. So, that told us right away that people were out of their cells.

We went from that side to the other side, and we couldn't really see too many cells down [the tier], but at that time, we identified ourselves and... Lorado worked in the RHU, and even though I was a trainee, I was the only trainee that went in there when we did a shakedown a week or so before. So, they knew who I was also... not as well as Lorado, but they knew who I was.

A that time, we heard scurrying and moving and stuff down the tier that we didn't know what it was. After a while we were there, Lt. Cooney and some others entered and were standing there and they [the inmates] start throwing out fire... like paper wads lit and they're landing on the floor and it starts getting smoky. We tell them, "Hey, we're not coming down there to put those out. We can't see down there. We're not coming down." After that we started hearing splashes as they threw water on those. We ended up staying in there, because they started... we had to go through the block.

Everything after that, I know, blurred for me, because of lack of sleep. I know for a fact though, because on my 48<sup>th</sup> hour, I took an inmate to Polyclinic Hospital, who had been injured. It was 53 hours by the time I finally got out of there.

**McNaughton:** Oh my goodness. As a COT, only on the job for six months, are you thinking, "What the heck have I just gotten myself into?"

**Rhodes:** I cannot say that. No. Because... even though it was only six months, I had become friends with so many of them... I always worked two cell blocks... they were the worst – besides the RHU – cell blocks at that time. I was always in F or J. So, I knew the people that were in them, along with others throughout the area. I didn't... because I've always wanted to take care of people. I always wanted to help people. So, as bad as it was, I never really thought of quitting. I thought, "How can I help?"

**McNaughton:** Talk to me about whether there was any kind of debriefing for staff and how that went? Did you go to debriefing?

**Rhoades:** I think it was in Central Office.

**McNaughton:** I know that they did bring a number of employees down into the basement of Central Office and they were having some debriefings there...

**Rhoades:** Yes.

**McNaughton:** Were they helpful to you?

**Rhoades:** Not really, because no one really knew and because we were still in it, if you understand what I mean. It was too soon. I think it takes a week or so or three days at least to process everything. Because when you're in it... I know you can tell the story, but you can't tell how you feel.

**McNaughton:** Right. And that's usually the first question they ask you is, "How are you feeling?" which is kind of weird, isn't it?

**Rhoades:** Yes, and you don't have an answer for them, because you're really not feeling at that time, because you've put things in boxes in your head. You've filed your boxes. You have your boxes and you put them away. You start doing that, and you don't know how you feel.

**McNaughton:** Right. After your 53 hours of work and you finally go home, when did you come back again? The next day?

**Rhoades:** Yes. I came back the next day, and we started working 12-hour shifts.

**McNaughton:** Then the rest of the time was spent cleaning out the cells and moving inmates around to different yards and also shipping the inmates out to other institutions.

**Rhoades:** Well, when we got back there, the inmates were still in the field... on the main field. At that time, everyone is looking for the leader. I had seen the leader. I knew where he was, so I headed down to the field and all of the state police who were there. I asked who was in charge and I walked up to him and I took him to Booker, and I pointed out, "This is who everyone is looking for. This is Booker." And they took him from there.

Then after that we were there as security, because it wasn't right away that they brought anybody in, because maintenance started cleaning out all of the cell blocks. That took a while, because every cell was emptied and everything ... they used little loaders to pull all of the trash out.

**McNaughton:** Right. They had... then security had to go through and make sure... check every cell.

**Rhoades:** Correct.

**McNaughton:** ...and use the ones that weren't damaged, that could still hold inmates.

**Rhoades:** Yes. And that's why, just like before, but at that time they also got chains and locks. So, thankfully, I've learned in positions I did... I'll never forget... if something happens again, I will call and tell them that PEMA has them all. PEMA has enough chains and locks for everything. I talked to people after that... once I worked at PEMA... that they've always had chains and locks ... I guess we got our own chains and locks.

They started bringing up groups of inmates using the horses and state police to escort them on the blocks. We strip searched everybody as they came in, and put them in cells, and tried to identify each inmate as they came in.

**McNaughton:** That's good. Tell me about how did the riot... once you... a week goes by and you've processed everything... did you have nightmares?

**Rhoades:** I did, and more than anything else, my wife would tell me about yelling, "Stop It!" I think that was when we were at the gate and they were beating the officers.

**McNaughton:** Oh, so you're yelling in your sleep?

**Rhoades:** Yes. She had to move over to the edge [of the bed], because I was thrashing about. Just on and on. I did have nightmares... not that I... really remember myself a lot.

**McNaughton:** Joe Miller... I had talked to him and he said that a lot of the forgotten people are the hostages and their family members and all that they have to go through...

**Rhoades:** Yes.

**McNaughton:** ... afterwards, but you're giving a good example of how even individuals who weren't hostages and who were just working through the situation... how it also impacted their families. So, your wife must have been watching it on TV and thinking, "Wow."

**Rhoades:** Yes, she was standing on the other side of the [railroad] tracks hoping to see me.

**McNaughton:** Yeah.

**Rhoades:** ... over by Capital City Mall, she was standing by the railroad tracks.

**McNaughton:** There's a strip mall over there that a lot of people were standing at.

**Rhoades:** Yeah, but even they would come through the trees up to the railroad tracks, without coming over the railroad tracks, because that was state land, so they didn't come over them ... they weren't allowed, but there were groups of people who stood and watched.

**McNaughton:** How old were you at the time?

**Rhoades:** 28

**McNaughton:** Did you have kids too at the time?

**Rhoades:** No, I did not at the time.

**McNaughton:** That's terrifying.

**Rhoades:** Looking back... it helped my career because people realized they could be around me and trust me. I sure didn't know that at the time.

**McNaughton:** You used your experience later on, on the job, you're saying.

**Rhoades:** Yes. I did a lot of teaching. I did a lot of teaching and I probably taught things a lot of people didn't. I talked to people about being hostages and what they should do to help them.

**McNaughton:** Let's fast forward to people in the future listening to your interview... what kind of advice would you give to people who might find themselves in a dangerous situation in a prison, whether it's an assault situation or all the way up to a riot? What's some tips of advice you'd give?

**Rhoades:** The biggest thing I told them is... the first couple of hours are going to be the worst. No matter what, because everybody's organizing, and you're going to... it's going to be the worst time in your life.

What you need to do ... is... and it might sound funny to you, but you've got to find your happy place. You've got to find your happy place during that time, because no matter what happens to you, they are not touching the inside of you. You find your happy place and keep yourself there, because they might do things to your body, but they can't do something to your brain or your soul. So, you have to find your happy place no matter what. That was one of the main things I would teach people.

Once they do it... let them... if it hurts, let them know it hurts. Be human to them. Because, especially if you're an officer, all they see is a uniform. They don't see us. They see our uniforms and not a person. I know we're taught to be tough, but when you're a hostage, you don't want to play like you're a tough man, because they are just going to beat on you more.

**McNaughton:** Right. I talked to Clarence John Wingert.

**Rhoades:** OK.

**McNaughton:** He was a COT and was a hostage, and I asked him, "How did you get through this," and he said pretty much the same thing you did. He imagined himself with children. He didn't have any kids, but he pictured what life would be like with kids. He also mentioned that he did try to engage with them so they saw him as a human. Exactly what you're saying.

**Rhoades:** It definitely changed everyone involved. It made us more aware... more security minded. I think... if you heard things through the years since then... because the state was involved with people coming from other institutions to help us and man the institution. The whole state got involved. What it did was make people more aware of what we needed. I'm by no means... am I here to complain about anything, but we need to stay together. The best thing the Department of Corrections did was what starting the programs after, like CERT and things like that. Not only [did it help Camp Hill, but] it helped the state.

**McNaughton:** A lot of things that came out of the riot... there were good things that came out of it... which was how we learned to compartmentalize all of the institutions with inner fencing

so hopefully we can never have this large-scale, entire institution situation. We also got rid of outside clothing for inmates, tool control. Goodness, all of those tools...

**Rhodes:** Yes, they had it all the second night.

**McNaughton:** Chainsaws.

**Rhodes:** The chainsaws started up right away. Yeah.

**McNaughton:** Vehicles, and cameras. More cameras everywhere now.

**Rhodes:** Yes, everything.

**McNaughton:** We've really come a long way, and you stayed there for the rest of your career. You... really can testify about the fact that this is a completely different facility now then it was back then.

**Rhodes:** Oh, most definitely. I've done a lot of things and did many officer roles and training ... good folks that were there.

**McNaughton:** Amazing time, and everybody that I talked to... even though we're reaching the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this horrific event... it's very vivid for everybody. You can see exactly as if it was yesterday. Would you agree with that?

**Rhodes:** Oh, most definitely. Yes. I can smell... I can smell the furniture factory burning... and the coffee. Such a nasty smell... the coffee and that burning. I can sometimes smell that.

**McNaughton:** Yeah. I remember coming to work before the riot, you could smell them making the coffee, and it smelled like burnt waffles.

**Rhodes:** Yes.

**McNaughton:** It's funny the things we remember, isn't it?

**Rhodes:** Yes, it is.

**McNaughton:** Is there anything else you recall that you want to share that we might have jumped over or forgotten?

**Rhodes:** I'm sure I will once I hang up. You know how that goes.

**McNaughton:** I just want to thank you for taking time to share your recollections with us. It's really important, I think, to share with future generations down the road so they can learn and hopefully never repeat this incident.

END