

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: David Farney  
Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots**  
Interview Date: September 4, 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 4, 2019, is Dave Farney. Thank you for joining us, Dave.

**Farney:** Thank you. My pleasure.

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

**Farney:** Sure. I began with the DOC in 1984 as an assistant counsel, and I continued to work for the DOC under the Office of General Counsel until retiring in January 2013. In 1989, there were, I believe, four of us in the Office of Chief Counsel. The chief counsel was Ted Otto. There was myself and Fred Smith and Dave Horowitz.

**McNaughton:** Right, and now there's a lot more.

**Farney:** Oh, yeah. A lot more.

**McNaughton:** Let's talk about the Camp Hill riot. It started mid-afternoon on Wednesday, October 25, 1989. Tell us where you were and what you remember.

**Farney:** I was in the office that day, and I was in my office which was on the third floor just around the corner from the Press Office, and I got a call from Steve Miller, who was a good friend of mine who was down in Human Resources on the second floor. He said, "You've got to look out the back of the building there's something going on in the yard." I don't recall if I went down to Steve's office, I think I did initially... and saw a lot of inmates milling about... and this probably was shortly after it started because it was right around 3 o'clock or shortly thereafter ... and I think we were just all memorized watching it kind of develop and explode.



**David Farney**

What I remember most about that night... and I was there until about 11 or so that night when the situation had gotten under control... I think I watched most of it from the third floor back in the commissioner's complex with Dave Gearhart, Frank Gillis and Bob Bitner. They were back in the back corner... their windows faced right onto the yard where it was mostly taking place.

What I remember from that day, as I was telling you, Sue, before we started recording... I kind of have snip-its of memory, kind of like photographs in my head or short videos.

I remember the worst part of it was, and this was still in the afternoon because it hadn't gotten dark yet... we knew there were hostages... you could see it. In one case in particular, they paraded one to the middle of the yard... he was blindfolded, his uniform shirt was off, and they had him on his knees... and I don't remember what, but I think it was one inmate in particular that was there with the officer, but clearly, they were threatening him ... facing Central Office, because they knew we were all watching it. That was hard to watch... really hard to watch. I think at that point we knew there were hostages, we knew people's lives were in danger, and ... yeah, it was bad.

I remember at some point, that first day of the riot, seeing that they had a vehicle or two. It must be pictures after the fact, because I don't think we could see this from Central Office, but where they got a vehicle and tried to ram the fence... the rear fence toward the Capital City Mall.

**McNaughton:** Tell me what the atmosphere was like in the office with those other individuals... and that room/office that you were in was right next to where the commissioner and deputy commissioner were. What was the atmosphere, was there a lot of running around, screaming...

**Farney:** Well, it wasn't screaming. It wasn't panic or anything. I think we were in shock. I'll be honest... this is true for me for all three days... it kind of felt helpless. What can we do? There's nothing we can do but sit here and watch. At that point it was just corrections personnel, state police then, of course, came in force... other police, first responders. It was like they had to take control of the institution and there was nothing we could do. I don't remember having any contact with the commissioner that day. There was no...

Here's a snip-it I remember that I think is a little unusual. Ted was not there... the chief counsel... he was out in the western part of the state either on vacation, personal time or business, but I don't even think he was there for the second... I don't think he got there until Friday. So, I was in touch with him and told him what was going on. I might have spoken to Roz Robinson, who was our liaison with the Office of General Counsel's Office (OGC). If I did, it was brief, and I'm sure she got her information from higher up, but at that time the OGC didn't have nearly as close a connection with the department offices that they do now. So, there was no real role I was playing or that our office was playing. I felt like we were more bystanders. The atmosphere was, kind of, disbelief, anxiety... because people were clearly in danger... there were hostages... helpless bystanders is what it felt like.

**McNaughton:** So, essentially everything, every project that you had been working on up to that point just kind of came to a screeching halt.

**Farney:** Absolutely.

**McNaughton:** Tell me how that night ended and then the next day... you just came to work?

**Farney:** Yeah. The night ended, I think, once all of the inmates were put back in the housing units, although I don't think we knew at the time what kind of danger that posed, but... I only know after the fact, I'm not sure I would have known or the four of us watching would have known, but I guess there was an agreement reached with the superintendent to talk with the inmates the next day. So, it seemed like it was all calm, there was plenty of police there. I left about 11, 11:30 that night. I came back to work the next morning. I don't think anything was normal. I don't specifically remember what I did that day, but everything... the institution was partially torn up and there was no "business as usual" at that point.

**McNaughton:** And then you left at your, pretty much, your regular quitting time... then what happened?

**Farney:** I did. What I remember that Thursday evening was... I was volunteering on a help line and a friend of mine who was watching TV called and started talking about the riots and watching on TV. I said, "Well, you know that was yesterday, right?" He wasn't from the Harrisburg area. And he said, "No, it's happening right now." I couldn't believe it, so I hung up and called... I don't remember who I called... but I called and got a hold of somebody and they said they wanted everybody in... everybody from Central Office in. So, I drove from the East Shore. It was dark, of course, it was October. From the end of Lisburn Road... I came from the eastern end of Lisburn Road... you could already see flames... police sirens everywhere. I think I was stopped at the end of Lisburn... stopped by a state policeman. I told him who I was and that I had been called in. He let me go in. I parked and went upstairs. That was even more shocking that night.

**McNaughton:** How so?

**Farney:** Well, it was dark. Multiple buildings were on fire. Clearly the inmates were in more control than they had been in the riot the previous day. It seemed like, wow, all hell breaking loose at this point. I remember one snip-it is ... with the buildings on fire... the cell blocks in particular, the ones right behind Central Office... I remember seeing people running across the roof and it was inmates. It was like... wow!

**McNaughton:** That was very eerie. I remember seeing that too. It's dark and they were silhouetted against the flames, and you weren't really sure who you were seeing.

**Farney:** Yes, it was very, very odd. Again, there was this feeling of helplessness. I was just hoping they could get things under control and save people's lives. That night, we stayed all night. That went on through the night. I remember a helicopter coming, or an ambulance, because a staff member either had been brought out... if I remember right, inmates brought the staff member out who was severely injured.

**McNaughton:** Yes, somebody else mentioned that.

**Farney:** ...yes, in front of ... if you're looking out of the back of Central Office, it was the first block to the right, it was in that yard... in the grassy area between that block and the fence. They brought that... I kind of thought he might be dead... I remember thinking that. I don't know if we realized at some point that he wasn't, but it was really horrible to watch. But they brought that inmate [he meant to say staff member, not inmate] out and then he was taken away.

**McNaughton:** Who took him away, do you remember?

**Farney:** I don't.

**McNaughton:** Was there a special rescue team that went and got him...?

**Farney:** Maybe. Maybe a corrections team.

I remember the ninjas. Later in the night and in the same area I remember seeing ... they were dressed in all black, and clearly it was law enforcement. I'd never seen anything like that before, but what I remember seeing them... in the same area I described where the staff member had been brought out that had been injured and rescued and taken away. The flames just burned and burned and burned.

The other thing I remember, it was very early the next morning the assembling of the state police... hundreds of them... armed... that was right behind Central Office.

**McNaughton:** Facing us.

**Farney:** Yeah, it was amazing to watch... just incredible this was all happening right in front of us and just... it seemed like fairly quickly, once they assembled all that show of force... and I know after the fact that shots had been fired and there were some injuries. I'm not sure if I remember knowing that at that time. It seemed like in fairly short order, like within an hour or so of that happening, that they quelled the riots and the inmates had given up. I remember them crawling on their bellies coming out. I don't know if it was in small numbers or one by one, but they had a system for getting them in control and cuffed and control of the institution. And then, honestly, nothing was ever the same again. It changed the system. It changed our office.

**McNaughton:** Tell me how it changed your office/the chief counsel's office.

**Farney:** We had traditionally been, after the Chief Counsel's Office was created, back in the early 80's for each agency... we traditionally did advisory work to department administrators, representation of the department in administrative hearings, civil service and maybe unemployment now and then. We didn't traditionally do litigation, but after the riots there was one large class action, I believe it was called Arbogast, that was brought immediately after the riot about the conditions the inmates were being held in out in the yard, they were still cuffed... it happened immediately and was ongoing for quite a while... over the various conditions they were being held in... and then dozens and dozens of lawsuits were filed by the inmates, believe it or not... post-riot... about the conditions at Camp Hill and what was happening, claims of retaliation, use of force... all kinds of punishment outside of policy, etc.

The Attorney General's Office who handled that was overwhelmed with it, and then there were discussions within about a year after the riot of our office starting to handle some of the other inmate litigation that they traditionally handled... from other prisons, straightforward litigation, and we did that. Initially it was just for the Middle District of Pennsylvania and it was just certain kinds of cases that they thought we could handle in relatively short order. Then it just kept expanding, because the inmate population kept expanding for a while there. So, eventually... we were severely understaffed for that undertaking for many years. That only had begun to be addressed when Governor Ridge came in and Sarah Vandenbraak was appointed chief counsel and she became aware of how understaffed we were. She did a long fight, and a fairly successful one, to get ... we got a lot more staff in that period of time.

**McNaughton:** You're talking about Ridge and 1995.

**Farney:** It just was a snowball effect, really, that lasted for years and years. I would say it was a good late '90s until we were up and running with enough staff to handle all of that and our traditional obligation as a chief counsel's office.

The riots had an impact all across the department. Things were different after that... we had the new commissioners after that... they all brought a more expertise approach... I'm not criticizing Commissioner Owens, it just seemed like the approach to corrections had to change. Commissioner Lehman, Marty Horn and Jeff Beard, and Secretary Wetzel... I didn't really work that long under, but it just changed everything.

Back to those few days after the riot... I remember it was kind of like, I'm here, I'm a lawyer, but we weren't serving a legal function in those days. There were really no legal questions to be answered. It was a matter of the administrators and state police and our people at Camp Hill and other institutions getting control of the situation. We weren't playing roles as lawyers. It was an "all-hands-on-deck" approach.

We were there all-night Thursday night, all day Friday until Friday evening. Most of us hadn't slept for 36 hours. And then Saturday morning, I remember coming in... I think the whole weekend, and I don't remember the order, but I know a whole bunch of us from Central Office were making baloney sandwiches in the cafeteria for inmates and staff. I remember also working over across the road from Camp Hill's administrative building... there were some outbuildings... there were National Guard field ovens set up and we were cooking MRE's ... meals ready to eat... again, I think those were for first responders, but everything was so turned upside down. You had hundreds and hundreds of inmates out in the field shackled for days and they had to be fed... and all of these additional state personnel had to be fed. It was just an incredible undertaking.

**McNaughton:** Tell me what it looked like as you were walking from Central Office over to those outbuildings... what did you see parked along the roadway...

**Farney:** I think that whole field across from Central Office was all parked with cars. I think I parked there the night of the riot... the second night. State police everywhere, firetrucks, ambulances...

**McNaughton:** And the news media mixed in among it...

**Farney:** Yes, absolutely. Very crazy time. In knowing I was going to be talking to you, I was hoping I could remember specific conversations, but I really don't. I remember what it felt like when we were all watching it both that first day and that second night ending the next morning.

**McNaughton:** We all just kind of chipped in and did what needed to be done.

**Farney:** We did. It was just... be there in case you were needed for whatever it was. Then after the fact, we were needed for stuff like making sandwiches and cooking MRE's. It sounds crazy, but it had to be done.

**McNaughton:** Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about that you maybe forgot to mention.

**Farney:** I think in the immediate days afterwards, I think Linda Morrison had to go buy locks. She was in purchasing... was she with Joe Miller...

**McNaughton:** She had talked about how she went inside with Dave Garlinger after the first day to... look at equipment that the kitchen needed. She was surprised that night when she found out it was starting again. I have Joe Miller set up for an interview.

**Farney:** Was Joe in security at Central Office?

**McNaughton:** No. He was a lieutenant at Camp Hill at the time. I have a lot of different names popping up as I talk with different people.

**Farney:** It's been fascinating to see all of these names on the Facebook group. Wasn't it you and Ken in the Press Office?

**McNaughton:** Well, I was the clerk steno. Ken was the press secretary, and he had a brand-new deputy press secretary, Sherri Cadeaux. She had been at the training academy on Utley Drive when the riot started and left her ID in her desk drawer and couldn't get through the roadblock. We had to send our messenger to verify who she was to get her through the roadblock. Our former deputy press secretary was Iris Crumbly. She, at that time, was serving as assistant to the commissioner, but she helped out with the media calls.

**Farney:** Yeah, that's right. Blast from the past. I appreciate the opportunity to give whatever recollection I had.

**McNaughton:** Thank you. Everybody's story is important no matter what role they played in the event, and they all weave together... the stories.

**Farney:** They do. They do. I think it's a great project and a story that needs to be told. My hat's off to you.

**McNaughton:** Thank you.

END