

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Frederick A. Smith Jr.

Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots**

Interview Date: September 6, 2019

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. This oral history focuses on memories from the October 1989 riot at the State Correctional Institution at Camp Hill. Our guest today, September 6, 2019, is F. Andrew Smith Jr., who was known while working at the prison as Fred Smith. Thanks for joining us. Before we begin could you please provide us with a brief overview of your DOC career – tell us at which facilities you worked and the titles you held.

Smith: I started at the State Correctional Institution at Dallas in December 1971. I transferred to Camp Hill in August 1974, and I retired from Camp Hill in July 2002 as the reception lieutenant.

McNaughton: Tell us what you remember about the riot, how it started, where you were and what happened to you. Let's go to Wednesday, October 25, 1989.

Smith: At approximately 2:30 they were bringing Group 2 and 3 yard in off the field.

That night I was the control desk sergeant, and I got the first call that there was a situation happening at E Gate. If memory serves me correct, I think Officer Thomas was the E Gate officer, and several inmates assaulted him and then all hell broke loose from there.

We started receiving calls... they were trying to get the inmates into the housing units, and it wasn't long after that that I was getting calls from E, F, G, H, J and K Blocks stating that they were being assaulted... they were trying to break into where the officers were. After that it was just call after call after call asking for help.

McNaughton: Is that how they mostly were able to communicate back then was through phones?

Smith: Strictly through the telephones.

McNaughton: No radios?

Smith: We didn't have radios back then.

McNaughton: That must have been pretty hectic.

Smith: We had megaphones at that time for the officers to communicate to the inmates on the blocks. No, it was... they had nothing. The officers basically were there, they had a set of keys for the lockboxes and stuff and doors. They had their voice and nothing else. At that time, we had sergeant... I'm not even sure if they had a sergeant on the block back then... two officers per block. I think it was after they got the blocks re-secured that they put sergeants in all of the housing units. I might be wrong, there may have been... now Mohawk, which is D Block... they had a sergeant in there and two officers.

McNaughton: Mohawk was the Group 1 side, right?

Smith: That was in the Group 1 side.

McNaughton: So, you're in the control center, you said?

Smith: I was in the control center.

McNaughton: ...getting all of these calls... and what did you do?

Smith: I was making stenographic notes trying to keep the officers calm, relayed the information to the shift commander. I don't know where the junior shift commander got to when hell broke loose. It was later that Deputy Henry came in... Deputy Smith came in... and they were of no use. I mean, to be honest with you, they were of no use to the control center.

I was the one that ordered the tower officers and the security patrol... when they started assaulting officers outside of the blocks... to shoot if necessary to protect the officers on the ground. Up to that point there wasn't a shot fired.

Later on, the deputy's assistant – Cindy Fitzingo – came in, and she manned the telephones while I manned the radios.

The only ones that had radios were the lieutenants... the area lieutenants and the area sergeants. So, basically what I was getting over the radios was from them. The telephones... from tower officers and block officers... and this is all over Group 2 and 3. Group 1 was not affected the first night.

If you didn't know better... if you had just walked into the control center and sat there and saw what was going on, you would have thought that Cindy Fitzingo was the deputy. She acted more like the deputy, and she made decisions that helped us out versus the deputies.

McNaughton: Tell me a little bit about what you heard about the hostages. What was happening to them?

Smith: All that we were informed in the control center at that point was that the hostages were... some of them were being beaten. We didn't have any other picture of what was going on in the housing units other than the fact that it was total chaos in there. They were trying to bust into the control boxes.

Nathan Hargrove was in E Block... and they busted some of the block out trying to get into him. I remember him distinctly, because he called me... I don't know how many times... about getting help over there. It was like they were trying to amass help.

But I learned over the years that when you have a situation that drastic, you don't rush officers in. Because they did ... and there were about six or seven officers who rushed over there to E Gate, and they got assaulted. Those two wound up over in Harrisburg Hospital with major injuries. One had his jaw broken. The other was hit over the head. Everyone who went over there got assaulted.

McNaughton: So, this went on for several hours.

Smith: That went on until... I want to say about 8 or 9 o'clock that evening. It started about 2:30 [p.m.].

I remember going over to the major's office... Superintendent Freeman, Deputy Smith and Deputy Henry were there along with Mike Kazor and Major Stover, and I said, "They got all of the inmates back in the housing units over there." That was the report I got from the lieutenant.

Major Stover said, "Ok, we need to send in teams to search these cell blocks to make sure... the guards' report was that the locking mechanisms weren't working... they were destroyed."

Mike Kazor stood up and said, "Excuse me, but we need to get the inmates checked for medical and get them fed first." Superintendent Freeman agreed with Mike Kazor.

So, they threw security out the door right then and there.

Later on, in my opinion, Major Stover took the fall for them [the inmates] breaking out day two, because the place was not secure whatsoever.

After that, there wasn't much we could do that night other than... well, we accounted for all of the inmates and then they were trying to get a count of the staff that were injured.

I guess it was 8 o'clock the next morning when Major Stover told me to go home and get some sleep. I said, "Well, what time do you want me back?" He said, "Are you scheduled to work tomorrow?" I said, "No, I'll be on days off." He said, "Go home and get some sleep. If we need you, we'll call you."

Well, 5 o'clock came and they didn't call. So, my wife and I, we went to Harrisburg Hospital to see the officers that were injured. While we were over there, someone came in and he said, "They're at it again over at Camp Hill." I said, "That was last night." He said, "One of the nurses says they're at it again. I'll go call them." He called the institution and was told it was worse than the night before. So, we said so long to the injured officers and we piled into two cars. I said, "We can go in my vehicle. My wife can drop us off and she can go home, and I'll call her when I want her."

We got back to the institution around 7:30 [p.m.] that evening. I was in civilian clothing and they wouldn't let me inside the institution. So, I'm outside the main gate. Finally, somebody brought

and overcoat out and gave it to me and then they let me in. Then I was in Group 1. We were securing the inmates on the Group 1 field. I was there all night.

The next morning, I guess we were lined up over by E Gate, and the state police went in to Group 2 and 3 and then they brought the hostages out. I helped escort them back over to the Group 1 side where they had triage set up to check them out to determine whether they needed to be taken outside the institution or not.

I was doing this... doing that... all day long. I guess it was... I was there until Saturday. I was supposed to go home at 4 o'clock, because I had been on the clock for like 30 hours. Then they came to me and said, "Sgt. Smith, you're taking the DOC bus up to Waymart." I said, "I'm supposed to get off at 4 o'clock." They said, "Well, we don't have another DOC bus sergeant. You're going to Waymart."

So, I went, and I had two of the regular bus officers with me, and we took the bus down to Group 2 and 3 yard, pulled in there and they gave us a list of inmates to load up. We had... there were two of them acting up. I told the state police, "I ain't taking them. If they want to behave like that out here in the field with all the state police standing around with guns, I ain't taking them on the bus." They said, "Fine. Put them back in the huddle." So, I put a check mark beside the names [of inmates] that I didn't take, and we ended up... we had three DOC buses, two DOC vans and 14 school buses. We went out of there with 264 inmates.

McNaughton: All in like a convoy?

Smith: In a convoy. We had seven police cars in front of us, seven police cars in back of us and each state police car had at least two troopers in it.

From the time we pulled out of Camp Hill, we never stopped until we pulled into Waymart.

The only problem we had going up... we were up around Hazleton, and Graterford van says, "We just switched to our auxiliary tank." They forgot to fill up before we left. So now we're doing calculations of how many miles a gallon we're getting and what they'd get on a van. Our buses were fine, we all were topped off. They said, "Well, we can get fuel at Dallas." But they didn't want to break up the convoy. Then it was like, "Can we get a fuel truck to come out and fuel this?" Then I was on communications with the state police and I said, "You know what. If my calculations are correct, we can make it into Waymart ok, but we're going to need fuel at Waymart." So, luckily, we made it into Waymart and they did have a fuel truck there for diesel fuel and gas to gas and fuel everybody up.

We had one [inmate] on the bus that was acting up and I told [Deputy] Superintendent White, "He don't belong up here. Do you have a maximum-security area?" White said, "Not really." I said, "I'll drop him off... all I need is the word... and I'll drop him off at Frackville." He sent word back down that they would keep him [at Waymart]. I said, "OK," and they told me to get back to Camp Hill.

We got back to Camp Hill Sunday morning around 10 o'clock in the morning.

When we pulled into Waymart, they had two fire trucks there with deluge guns on them. Do you know what a deluge gun is?

McNaughton: Big hose?

Smith: It's a pipe to shoot water down under pressure. They had that set up that if there was any problem they were going to use the deluge guns on them. They had, I don't know how many fire trucks there, they had every local cop in the area up there. The only state police there were the ones that escorted us in, and they stayed there until we got them processed and off the bus.

The officers there at Waymart... I'm not sure where they were from, because they were not really ready to open Waymart at that time, but they took them in and processed them. We got our hardware and they released us, and we headed back to Camp Hill.

They emptied the school buses first, because they only had officers on board for security. So, they got them off first and unloaded all 14 [buses]. As they unloaded them, they went down and got fueled and went back to Harrisburg, because that's where they came out of.

The DOC vans were the next to be unloaded, because they had the smaller number [of inmates] on board. There were three DOC buses... we had 28 on board, except for me... I was two shy.

So, I came back, went home. I reported back to work Monday morning, and the superintendent's assistant – John Palakovich – got a hold of me and he said, "You were control desk sergeant when this started?" I said, "Yep." Palakovich said, "We need to account for every inmate."

We spent all day Monday into Tuesday and we accounted for every inmate but one. We went over and over and over and over it. The rumor was that there were dead bodies over at Holy Spirit [Hospital].

Somebody just happened to mention [to me], "Jeff White took an inmate out of here on Friday night." I said, "I don't have anything on it." No inmate should go out of that institution without any paperwork indicating he was taken out.

Well, apparently, he [the inmate] was a snitch or something... I don't know... but I got a hold of Jeff White and asked, "Did you take an inmate out of here on Friday night?" White said, "I can't talk about it." I said, "This is critical. I need to know who you took out... name and number... where you took him to. I don't care anything else about it." White said, "I can't talk about it."

Palakovich heard him and said, "If you want to keep your job, you better start talking. Did you or did you not take an inmate out of here?" I don't recall the name of the officer with him [White], but he told Palakovich who it was, and I said, "Count's clear." That was our missing inmate.

McNaughton: What was Jeff White's capacity that he could take an inmate and not talk about it?

Smith: Somebody from Security snagged him and another officer, and the state police directed them to take this inmate down to Cumberland County to be held for security... to get him out of the prison, because he apparently was giving up what was going on. We call it a snitch, but that... Jeff White and the other officer, they just got snagged.

McNaughton: ...and they did what they were told, and they were told to keep quite.

Smith: When they went out through the main gate, they should have given the inmate name and number... you don't take an inmate in or out of the prison unless you've got a piece of paper.

McNaughton: So, had somebody not told you, you'd probably still be searching for this one inmate. Because he [White] wasn't going to come forward and tell anybody.

Smith: Right. Actually, we knew who we were missing, because we went down through all of the inmates in the institution. We had the list of every inmate by name and number that was taken out of the institution on Friday night, because they took some to Smithfield. They took some up to the federal prison at ah...

McNaughton: Lewisburg...

Smith: No. Way up above Route 6, there's a federal prison up there. It's the coldest spot in Pennsylvania. If it's ever going to snow in Pennsylvania, it's the first place it snows.

They took so many inmates up there, and they took so many inmates to Smithfield. We had all of the names and numbers of them. We had the names and numbers of every inmate we took up to Waymart, and we had the name and number of every inmate, and it deduced down to this one inmate. We knew who the inmate was, we just couldn't find him. When Jeff White finally gave it up, the count cleared.

McNaughton: Well, thank you for that, because even some of the people that I'm interviewing still think that somebody was killed.

Smith: There was nobody... I can sit here right now and tell you... there was no inmates killed. There was no staff members killed. There were two inmates shot, and one was taken to the Osteopathic [Hospital] and the other one went to Holy Spirit [Hospital].

McNaughton: Do you know what kind of wounds those were, because...

Smith: Shotgun wounds.

McNaughton: Real shotgun wounds? Not like birdshot or buckshot?

Smith: They charged the state police down by E Gate, and state police let off two rounds and two inmates dropped. The one, they couldn't believe that he lived, because he took a pretty good shot to the stomach. Back then, I'm pretty sure the state police were using 00 buck. Because they got the ammunition out of our armory. I don't know what they used as their standard ammunition, but we used 00 buck for our towers, and the state police needed shotgun shells, so we donated to them. Yeah, it was for a good cause.

McNaughton: After the count cleared, then what did you do?

Smith: After count cleared... Major Stover got a hold of me as I was coming out of Palakovich's office, and he said, "Well, I don't know how we're going to man this place. We're down 147 staff members." I said, "If I was in your shoes, the only way you're going to man this place is to go to two shifts -- 6 at night to 6 in the morning and 6 in the morning to 6 at night."

I guess it was about two hours later that word came down. I was on the 2-to-10 shift, and 2-to-10 shift and 6-to-10 shift was going 6 at night to 6 in the morning. The 6-to-2 shift and the 8-to-4's and the extra people there were going 6 in the morning to 6 at night. I would have rather been on the 6 in the morning to 6 at night, because I'm not a night person. I don't sleep too well when the sun's up, but after that, [I went] wherever they needed me. I was that way for the rest of that day, and two days later I went to work at 6 at night and... George Nichols was the 10-to-6 desk sergeant, and I was the 2-to-10 desk sergeant. So, what they decided to do, since we were the senior sergeants for the control center, was... when George was off, I was control desk sergeant. When I was off, he was control desk sergeant. So, it ended up, when he was on the control desk, I was line sergeant for Group 1 and vice versa. So, we flip-flopped that way... we did that for seven months. Then, in May sometime, we went back on regular shift.

McNaughton: May of 1990.

Smith: Oh yeah. Then, I guess it was December 1990, I made lieutenant and then I went to Mohawk.

McNaughton: What were you thinking [laughter]...

Smith: I'd worked Mohawk... When I came to Camp Hill, since I had 2 years, eight months experience at Dallas... [they said], "You're going to Mohawk."

McNaughton: Just for historical purposes and for the listeners... what was Mohawk and how did it get its name?

Smith: All the housing units, when the place first opened, had Indian names, and the only one that stuck over the years was Mohawk. Mohawk was the restricted housing unit... in other words, if you did something you weren't supposed to do that was serious, you went to the "hole" as they called it. Only in there, they referred to it as Mohawk. You were locked up for basically... you got out of your cell for an hour of exercise a day and a shower. Other than that, you were locked in. You were fed in your cell. A nurse from medical came down every day and passed out the meds in their cells. If they claimed something drastic, then they were taken up to the dispensary and treated and seen by a doctor or whatever.

McNaughton ...under tight escort I'm sure, right?

Smith: Oh, yes. They were cuffed when they came out of their cells. You just didn't walk out and walk up there. Now they get a waist chain and a leash on them. They are handcuffed to waist chain and then they have a leash on them. If they are really, really bad, they get leg irons put on them. They have a minimum of two officers escorting them.

McNaughton: Talk to me about the control center the second night. So, you weren't in it, but people were stuck in there.

Smith: They burned out the deputy's office.

McNaughton: Which deputy? Smith?

Smith: Smith. They were trying to burn out the control center. From what I was told, those people got out of the control center and went up to the second floor and then they ended up... Jim Auxer, apparently, ramrodded it... and they got out through a window onto the rooftop, and I don't know how they got down off of that, but that's how they got out from upstairs. They were trying to burn them out.

McNaughton: When you finally went back to being the control desk sergeant, it was all burned out then?

Smith: No. they didn't actually burn the control center. They burned the deputy's area, which is right behind the control center. They did quite a bit of damage. Luckily, the two control gates there held.

NOTE: *There was a discussion here about an employee, and we have edited out that information due to privacy this employee requested.*

Smith: The bottom line at Camp Hill when the decision was made to start transferring inmates out on Friday evening... the big question was where to put them. The main reason they were doing it [transferring out inmates] was to lower the population down because of all of the damage to the cells.

When they finally got them locked up... they went out and bought big bull chains and pad locks... [the] Purchasing [Office] was calling around to see where they could get ... about 900 pad locks and 900 chains that they could cut into a certain length and get them over to the institution as quickly as possible. We didn't have the equipment for a riot like that... to re-secure. The officers were taking their handcuffs and handcuffing doors closed, and you still... with handcuffs, you don't have everything tight. Therefore, you've got a little bit of movement. Well, they [the inmates] would get on there and start yanking, and they busted quite a few handcuffs. And it wasn't until we got these bull chains in that you could really secure the cells. The ones that had the walls busted out, and so forth, you couldn't use them. That was the reason they were looking to where they could send all these inmates. That's why they sent up to ... up in the coal region and also out to Smithfield.

Then, the commissioner made the decision to open up Waymart right away, even though they weren't ready. They didn't even have that many staff up there at the time, so they pulled staff out of Frackville and Dallas and Retreat. Rockview and Huntingdon and Greensburg staff came in to Camp Hill. State police... they're lucky they didn't have any major problems in the state because three-quarters of the troopers were at Camp Hill.

That was the reason... we couldn't secure the facility totally, and we needed to lower the population. I'm not sure what the time frame was after that that we started taking inmates to Lewisburg.

I'll never forget this one [inmate]. He was raising holy cane, and I said, "Keep it up. You'll wind up in Alaska." He thought I was kidding. I was kidding. Well, when they started coming back, because Lewisburg took them in and processed them and then they shipped them all over the United States. Well, this one, I picked him up over at Harrisburg airport and brought him back to

Camp Hill along with others. He goes, "Boy, you weren't kidding about Alaska, were you?" I don't know how he wound up there, I didn't have anything to do with it.

Then there was another one... he wound up in Fort Polk, La., and down there, they're racial and he was a black individual. He mouthed off to the wrong person and he ended up in Fort Polk. He said, "I don't see how anybody in the Army ever wanted to be at that place." So, that wasn't too nice of a place either.

The third place I heard that wasn't nice was upstate Minnesota somewhere, especially in the winter time, and they were up there in the winter time.

I don't know how many trips I got sent on over to the airport to pick inmates up and to bring them back to Camp Hill.

McNaughton: What are some of the other major memories that you recall?

Smith: I think one of the biggest mistakes was the tower officers... they saw officers being assaulted, beaten around... one of them, in particular, they [the inmates] were stabbing him, and they didn't even fire a warning shot. When Mike Arnold fired the first warning shot... the minute that shotgun went off, they scattered. Now, they probably saved... it was Larry Arnold I guess... that saved his life. I think, had the other tower officers had the opportunity to do that... especially the security patrol officer that was sitting right there by the tower... never fired a shot. Never did nothing. Those were factors that could have helped saved quite a few.

The way it went down... the way the facility was laid out... communications... all those factors, we learned after the fact. If we had had that way back when, I think it would have been a different story.

The other thing was parole violators... there's no reason for them to be sitting around in one facility like that. They should have been dispersed throughout the state and wait for the parole board to decide what they were going to do with them... not congregate them all in one... basically, they were congregated in one housing unit, and that's where it started... E Block. I don't have sympathy for them. If you got paroled and you can't go out there and behave yourself, and you get picked up for a parole violation and brought back, I'm sorry you finish the rest of your sentence, and then if you have new charges pending, you serve that too. You had your chance, but they want to be ... I don't have any sympathy. That was a big factor that started all of this... a bunch of hot heads in there and all of the parole violators... they just jumped on the bandwagon.

McNaughton: Some of the other issues people talked about was the sick line call policy changed, and Family Day was cancelled.

Smith: Family Day was cancelled... I didn't totally agree with the Family Day policy. Bringing food in from the outside... no. There's too much contraband coming in and there's no way... if you went in there and started digging around in that food, the outside people were complaining, and we were told not to do it.

McNaughton: Oh, so just let the food in and don't dig through the potato salad...

Smith: Right. That kind of stuff was... even the officers in the guest house... they were upset about that.

I know the sick line policy... I don't think it was that drastic... those little things there was just like the parole violators throwing a can of gasoline on a fire. You've already got the fire, now these are just issues they want to build on.

When they met with the superintendent and deputies on day two, it was all basically... the issues that they were complaining about were BS issues. They were not major issues.

The major issue that they did talk about was that they were sitting there doing nothing and they're not getting processed. That's not the institution's fault. That's the parole board's fault.

The parole board has to make the decision that they are going to revoke parole permanently, extend their sentence, etc. The institution doesn't do that. All the institution does is send a report to the parole board saying, "Hey, we got this guy back, and this is the paperwork that comes with him." Then we are just holding him for the parole board.

McNaughton: Yeah, for days, months...

Smith: Some of them were in there a year.

McNaughton: ... just to find out that they might be reparaoled?

Smith: Yes. It's a slow process. Personally, and this goes all the way back to when I first came to Camp Hill... I don't think there should be a parole system. I think that there should be flat sentencing. You do the crime. You got the time. Now, if you do the time... your sentence could be reduced for good behavior, but...

McNaughton: ... but once you're done, you're done.

Smith: Once you're done, you're done.

I think there are a few other sentences that don't belong in state prison and don't belong in county prison really. There was a concept thrown out years ago, for example... DUIs... instead of putting them in state prison, send them to South Mountain Restoration Center to empty bedpans and help take care of the patients down there at no cost to the taxpayer. If you don't do it, then you can be sent to prison. Alternatives like that. It would take some of the stress off of the Department of Corrections.

McNaughton: Anything else?

Smith: Not that I can think of.

McNaughton: Ok. I'm going to push stop.

END