

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Gere Kostelac
Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots**
Interview Date: August 27, 2019
Interviewer: DOC Communications Director Susan McNaughton

Interview Transcript

McNaughton: Welcome to the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' Oral History Project where we work to 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, August 27, 2019, is Gere Kostelac. Thank you for joining us, Gere.

Kostelac: Thank you, Sue.

McNaughton: Before we begin, could you please provide us with a brief overview of your DOC career, including at which facilities you worked and the titles you held.

Kostelac: Sure. I started off as a messenger at the State Correctional Institution at Camp Hill back in late '79, early '80. Basically, my job there was running parts, picking up mail and different little jobs like that. I then went into being a stock clerk down at the back of the institution at Camp Hill, where I was mostly handling freight... pretty much a lot of procurement for the institution. I then went ahead and took the test for corrections officer and became a corrections officer about three years later. Then I worked in various positions inside the jail for about five or six years during that period. Eventually a position opened up that I enjoyed and that was institutional music instructor at SCI Camp Hill. I held that [position] until the time after the riot. Right after the riot, they did away with that position, so I was temporarily a counselor assigned to reception. From that point, then, for about a year I went into operations again and became a sergeant at SCI Camp Hill and then eventually transferred to the training academy, which is the position I have right now as a training sergeant.

McNaughton: OK, Thank you. Let's talk about the Camp Hill riots. Tell me where you were on October 25th, and tell me your experiences moving forward.



Gere Kostelac

Kostelac: On October 25th, on that day I was assigned as the institutional music instructor. I was working the 12-to-8 shift, which was my assigned shift at the time, and coming in as we usually do, we would get a hold of the necessary keys that we would need for that day's work. The institution was kind of quiet that day, which was very unnerving. This is the third time that I had experienced something like that, because there were two riots previously at Camp Hill that I had went through. These were the same signs as prior to those that had happened. Consequently, as I went up to my office and we started running our various lines... music lines... activities lines....

McNaughton: Explain what lines are. That's the inmates signing up to go to the different activities.

Kostelac: Right. Inmates have a pass to come to various types of activities or are on call-out sheets. Consequently, I had them on a call-out sheet to come down. I had about 30 inmates that came down, collected their passes and they went ahead and were doing their particular activity for that day.

I had an inmate come running into my office, and he said, "Mr. K., Mr. K., There's officers getting beat up out here." I said, "What?" So, I walked over to the window, and sure enough there were inmates and they were punching officers, beating up on officers.

Officers were at the E Gate, and they were trying to go ahead and push them back... pushing the inmates back, and then they locked off E Gate. There were still some inmates running around and they were beating up an officer.

All of a sudden, I saw inmates coming out of E Block with fire extinguishers and all kinds of bats and other kinds of paraphernalia. They started pounding the locks at E Gate. The officers that were holding them back started running back toward the Group 1 section of the walkways that were there, and the inmates broke through the locks and started chasing the officers. Three officers were tackled. I saw two or three of the inmates jump up and down on him like a trampoline and took his keys, kicked him off to the side.

Then inmates were just like... all over the place... every gate starting to open up and inmates were coming out of the cell blocks... just pouring out into the main area yelling and screaming. They were pounding on the doors near our area. We were located up on the second floor, but they were pounding on the doors there. We also realized, too in watching it, that inmates had access to keys and they started going into the various cell blocks and opening them up.

When I looked over onto the left side of the compound, there was a truck and that truck was coming through and it rounded E Gatehouse and crashed into the side of the commissary. It literally just buckled the doors of the commissary that were there. Then from that point on the inmates were piling in there... they were pulling stuff out left and right... all kinds of commissary – TVs, cigarettes... you name it, they were taking it back up to the cell blocks.

Then they took the truck that they had bashed in the doors with, set the commissary on fire, backed out and then they took off down the E Gate road and tried to crash out of the institution. They went across the field and when I went back to the other side of my office to see where the truck went to, you could see the truck heading for the fence line. It crashed through the fence

line, but couldn't get very far. The officer up in the tower, he fired four shots to try to stop the truck, but he couldn't because he ran out of ammunition. The truck got stuck in the fence, and inmates were trying to pull it out, but they couldn't, and then the officer fired some more shots that he had, and the inmates retreated back toward commissary.

McNaughton: When you say fence line, you're talking about one of the two perimeter fences.

Kostelac: Right. The inner perimeter fence, and the only thing that kept that truck from going through both fences was the fact that the footer was like two to three feet above the ground and it ripped out the transmission. Otherwise you would have had numerous inmates pouring into Camp Hill area doing all kinds of things.

Inmates then, again, were swarming all over the area. The area that I was in was becoming very, very smoky because the inmates had taken over the kitchen. I saw the kitchen staff running out the back of the kitchen towards the main gate. Inmates came pouring in and they started setting the place on fire there.

Well, during that whole time, the inmates that I had... they were kind of like terrified. They kind of squirreled themselves away in various areas to hide, because they seemed to know what was going on. Then I heard this crashing... this banging... really loud. I ran around to the corner of that little area where the bathrooms were, and sure enough the bricks were flying out of the wall. Literally coming out of the wall. What had happened was that the inmates that were setting the fire down in Kitchen 1 were trying to get through that area to see what was there. They were just destroying everything. Well, they came out of the wall, and I was looking at the face of an inmate. The inmate saw me, and I saw him. I had grabbed a bat that I kept up there just in case there was a problem, and he said he was going to f*ck me up the *ass, he was going to kill me and everything else. I yelled to him and said, "Only one of you can come through that little opening at a time. If you want to be the first, come on, man, I'll take you on." He retreated back because the smoke had gotten so bad. The smoke was filling through there... so they retreated. Then, pretty much nothing was going on, at that time, for about maybe an hour or so. The smoke and the heat got worse. In fact, in the one corner of the music room it got so hot in there that the milk cases... plastic milk cases that they have... actually melted to the floor. That's how bad it was. So, I got on the phone and I called the control desk and I told them that I had 30 inmates, and then the door opened up again and here were some inmates and they brought in two hostages. Two guys... an officer and another guy who was with activities. They came up and that's when we found out that inmates had keys to access the place. So, I got on the phone and I told control exactly what the situation was. I told them. "If you could go ahead and get us some fire suppression or some way of getting us out of here, we could run over to the gymnasium and at least try to get out that way." Well, there was a deputy superintendent on the other end [of the phone], and he said, "There's nothing we can do for you. You're on your own." He hung up the phone on me. So, I went ahead and made a decision that we needed to hunker into place and try to keep ourselves safe as much I can. I took the keys... whatever keys the inmates gave me, plus my own keys and I went around my inside area snapping keys off in locks... turning them and snapping them off. Because I knew that inmates had keys and access to places, and if they tried to get in they couldn't get in through the keys that were broken off in through there. So, we

waited there for a better portion of four or five hours. No rescue had come. Nobody was there... nobody called us back. The smoke was getting really, really bad in the building. I told the other two employees that it might be time for us to get to the roof, and maybe get off that way if at all possible. I knew that we had ventilator shafts inside of our music area that led right to the roof with no problem. We got out that way. We took with us a portable phone up to the rooftop with us and then we called the control desk and other places letting them know that we were up on the roof waiting there. So, I guess we were up on the roof the better part of about two or three hours before a fire department truck came and got us.

McNaughton: Remind me again, exactly who was with you and how many were there?

Kostelac: I had 30 inmates with us that were in the band room with us, and then there two staff members that had been brought up during the riot.

McNaughton: You had mentioned that a couple of inmates came in with hostages.

Kostelac: Yeah, those were hostages that were originally taken outside, and they brought them in to the band room...

McNaughton: And then what?

Kostelac: ... because they knew that the band room was there and that there were people there that could probably help them. They didn't want any part of the riot whatsoever.

McNaughton: So, the inmates got their hands on people who were hostages and brought them to safety?

Kostelac: Yes, they did.

McNaughton: Did those hostages go up on the roof with you?

Kostelac: Yes.

McNaughton: So, they were part of the 30?

Kostelac: Yes. Then after they got us down off of the roof, we went for a physical and a quick debriefing. The debriefing was what happened and basically reliving what I'm telling you now. That was it... nothing else happened at that time. We stayed there until the better part of about 6 the next morning. Still hadn't eaten. So, I just asked permission to go and get something to eat, go home and shower and shave. I came back in the next day. By that time, we had pretty much locked down the jail... at least what was locked down. They asked us to go ahead and feed the inmates in the cell blocks. Well, there was no way we could feed the inmates, because there was trash about as high as your desk here. We just couldn't get around, plus none of the doors were secured. So, after we tried to do the feeding, then I was transferred to another section of the jail to help pack inmates to be shipped out in our reception unit. I was there until about 6 o'clock and at 6 o'clock I started leaving the institution to go home and that's when the rioting erupted again for the second night.

McNaughton: So, you were still inside at that time?

Kostelac: I was actually just about on the outside. I was right in the main gate area. From that point on it was just total chaos. People were coming in and out... state police were starting to gather outside. The sergeant at the main gate... he was getting calls left and right about inmates coming into various areas and setting things on fire... by that time the control desk center was overrun ... the whole administration building inside the institution was overrun... everything was on fire. Inmates were running all over the place, and then all of a sudden, these inmates were coming... there was about four of them... they were coming up toward the main gate. There were people in the towers ready to shoot these inmates. They were telling them to stop and stop and stop. When we looked out the window we saw that it was actually four staff members that were dressed in inmate clothing that had come out there. The group of us identified them and got them to safety. Shortly after that the commissioner of corrections and the superintendent were going back and forth as to whether or not they should bring shotguns into the jail or not.

McNaughton: They were physically at the gate?

Kostelac: They were physically at the gate... inside the front gate. Yes. The sergeant at that time was relaying information of calls of how people were getting beat up ... how people were being taken hostage and how the inmates were busting through various walls and taking out air conditioners in windows and crawling through. He talked with the state police commander that was there and nobody was making a decision. Finally, the state police commander had asked the sergeant, "If you can open up those doors, we'll go in and we'll start taking back the facility." Well, the superintendent and the commissioner were still deciding what kind of rounds to use in the shotguns. By that time the sergeant made a decision. He opened up both sets of gates, and that's when the state police started going into the institution. I actually went in about an hour or so later with a fire truck and had a riot baton in my hand and then we were going down the main walks trying to put out fires and get things taken care of. The whole education building was just totally engulfed in flames at the time. As we were going down E Block area... between E Block and the education building, rocks started coming down off the top of E Block. We saw an inmate up there, and they were throwing Molotov cocktails and everything down on us. One inmate had a saw attached to a sheet and he threw that down at us and it actually embedded itself into the side of the fire truck. That's when state police started opening fire on some of the inmates to get them back off of there. Finally, we waited and waiting and tried to put as many of the fires out as we could, and we waited up until they brought in a big massive water truck from Harrisburg International Airport and then they blew down the barricades that were across from E Block to the fence. Then we went in and state police were leading at that time... inmates were throwing rocks at us, and then the state police started going in and taking over the jail. They had to fire shots at some inmates and drop some inmates that were there and then started going in and started taking back the cell blocks.

McNaughton: That was early morning on the 27th?

Kostelac: That was on the 27th, yeah. Then we started bringing inmates out and putting them in the main fields until they could figure out what they wanted to do with them. That was pretty much where I was on that night. I was there for two days and another two days after that.

McNaughton: Just doing whatever needed to be done.

Kostelac: Yeah, I actually had been up working in the kitchen on the midnight-to-12 shift. We were working 12 hour shifts for the next two years.

McNaughton: A lot of people have talked about the fact there were warning signs. You also talked about that there was a “feel.” Did you have any inkling that this was coming, and inmates weren’t hinting to you about it?

Kostelac: Yeah, we knew nine months ahead of time that there was going to be a problem at the jail.

McNaughton: So, February?

Kostelac: We knew that since February. There were various pieces of paperwork that were put in [submitted], not only from officers that I had talked to but from other staff members that were there. We also saw rise in assaults. Commissary... in particular commissary inside the cell blocks was large... quite large. In fact, when we started tearing apart the cell blocks to get them ready to house inmates again, we found cases of steaks and eggs and balonies and cheeses and anything they could [get their hands on].

McNaughton: But you said that they looted from the commissary...

Kostelac: Right, but they were actually building up ahead of time. They were building up. And interestingly enough, when we looked at some of the calendars that the inmates had in their cells, the 25th was circled on a bunch of those calendars. The inmates knew that they were going to riot that particular day. They had tried previously to schedule two sit-down work strikes, but couldn’t get it together. The 25th, they figured there was a lot of animosity and a lot of talk going around... Rumors... and they said that they were going to riot on the 25th. A couple of my inmates in the Music Department had said that there was going to be some trouble. They didn’t quite know what day it was for sure, but they knew that it was leading up to a problem and they told me to be very careful when I came in. I had talked to other inmates afterwards when I went back into being an officer again at Camp Hill. Those inmates had told me that there were staff members that were told not to show up on the 25th. And those staff members didn’t show up on the 25th.

McNaughton: So, everybody tried to inform the higher-ups...

Kostelac: Yes.

McNaughton: ... and for whatever reason, they didn’t listen?

Kostelac: That I don’t know. I don’t know what happened to the paperwork or anything like that, but I knew that people were told about it. I told my bosses about it. I filled out paperwork about it as to the rumors that I had heard, and don’t know what happened to it after that.

McNaughton: I want to back up to when you were talking about the two previous riots at the institution. I know that there was a situation not too long before the actual ’89 riot involving the RHU. Tell me which incidents you’re talking about.

Kostelac: This one was in '82 and in '83. In 1982, we had a riot in C Block. I was an officer at that time on special relief. We had a riot in C Block, which was our reception block at the time, and what had happened was they transferred in a group of inmates that called themselves the FOI [Fruit Of Islam]. They had just murdered the warden down at Holmesburg Prison [a Philadelphia County prison not run by the DOC] and they sent them up to us and nobody gave us any background or anything. They recruited and touched off a riot in C Block where one of the officers up there almost got fatally stabbed.

McNaughton: Was it contained to that...

Kostelac: It was contained to C Block.

McNaughton: How many of the inmates were involved... more than half of the inmates?

Kostelac: The whole cell block was rioting because everybody was fighting. I pushed about seven inmates into one cell and was slamming doors left and right. One guy actually got a hold of me. He was trying to kill the officer... he was going to stab him with a pencil. I got a hold of him, spun him around... he hit me in the leg with the pencil... I got stabbed with a pencil in there. I took him down, cuffed him up and then there were other inmates just all over the place. So, we didn't have radios at that time. We didn't have megaphones or any kind of systems in place to stop anything like that. So, an inmate actually picked up the phone and called our control desk and said, "There's officers getting hurt in here." And they sent a response team of one sergeant. So, four of us locked up a whole cell block just by throwing inmates in cells left and right. That was the first riot I had ever been through.

The second riot was in 1983. I did much better in that one. I just had bowls and trays thrown at me... and they were metal bowls and trays at that time... metal knives, forks and spoons. We were pushing inmates in Group 2 back toward their cells. They had beaten up four officers really bad.

McNaughton: Where did that take place?

Kostelac: In Group 2.

McNaughton: Out in the open area?

Kostelac: Out in the open area and in the dining hall. That was over HIV/AIDS mostly, because...

McNaughton: That was new back then.

Kostelac: That was brand new and inmates were starting to be mainstreamed... those that had that infection were being mainstreamed into general population. Nobody bothered to tell the inmates or the staff anything about that.

McNaughton: And everyone was fearful, I'm sure.

Kostelac: That's what touched off the riot.

McNaughton: I read, I believe in '86 or '87, that there was some sort of incident in the RHU and to the point where they had to expand the RHU to the basement... I need to do more research...

Kostelac: That one I don't know about.

McNaughton: And then another former officer told me, that leading up to it, the problems that he experienced was that misconducts.... The officers would write misconducts, but they were being overturned to the point where inmates weren't being sent to disciplinary custody and that made the officer feel like, "Well, I don't know why I'm writing these anymore."

Kostelac: That's true. What happened was. They lost the RHU literally, because inmates were being cycled out of the RHU they weren't enforcing a lot of the disciplinary status that was there. They weren't following the [DC-ADM] 801 procedures, and they were overturning things quite a bit.

Also, one of the biggest things that people started to get complacent about or just not care about anymore was the fact of morale. Morale played a really big factor. They were... the administration was going after people for just about every little thing that was there. They were holding PDCs [pre-disciplinary conferences] and fact findings left and right. One, in particular, that came to mind, is where they got rid of a captain, a lieutenant and a bunch of people ... was a situation that happened in RHU with one particular inmate. They went in on that inmate and unfortunately roughed him up a little bit too much at the time. The administration didn't like it, so they fired the captain rather than suspend him. The reason for that was to send a signal to the rest of the group that we're not going to tolerate all of this. Consequently, morale deteriorated.

Another thing, too, that really led to it was the fact of health care. At that time, health care was so overrun by so many inmates going to sick line and pill line, that they came up with a process that if you had a last number in your institutional number was even, you would go on Monday, Wednesday and Friday; if it was odd, you would go Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. The interpretation of that led to the point that if a person was sick, they had to wait until their particular day; which was not the case at all, but it was never spelled out that way. This was actually coming to me from the inmates who were telling me all of this.

Family Day visits were stopped just abruptly. There were lots of policy changes... lots of procedural changes. There was no discussion and, all of a sudden, nobody knew which procedure we were going to follow that day, and it became very, very frustrating.

McNaughton: And frustrating for the inmates as well on the receiving end of miscommunication.

Kostelac: Absolutely, because they were the ones who were at the brunt of it because of those policy changes.

McNaughton: So, if they saw that officers now weren't really writing misconducts, that kind of sent them a signal that they could get away with a lot of different stuff.

Kostelac: And another big tell-tale sign ... they asked for protective custody. They were looking to get out of their cell blocks especially in F Block and J Block. They did not want any parts of those blocks whatsoever. They wanted to get off as fast as they could. So, they would actually assault either other inmates or staff just to get off the block. It was a snowballing effect that happened.

McNaughton: Let's fast forward and talk about how this riot has impact the agency, the department, and how things have changed. So, fencing...

Kostelac: Fencing. Definitely. They came up with better perimeter fencing than was there.

McNaughton: And internal fences as well?

Kostelac: Right. And then that's when the decision was made also to start building brand-new facilities during that time. It impacted how we handled crisis situations. This is actually what started our Corrections Emergency Response Teams to become better. We, technically had CERT on paper, but they never practiced.

McNaughton: And they didn't have the equipment...

Kostelac: ...and the equipment wasn't there. That was also the first time that we went into specialized teams. We rewrote our crisis management policies because of that. It changed our classification system. Because they had gotten rid of all of the music teachers across the state after this riot, I found myself almost without a job, so they put me as a counselor. What I saw was the beginning of a classification tool. And classification changed. They didn't have that kind of classification before. It was not as much warehousing as it was "let's just get the numbers down, let's just do this, let's get this piece of paperwork moved from here to here" and that was it. Now, we're actually looking at something that's generated by the computer and by other staff members and actually doing a prescriptive programming now for an inmate.

McNaughton: That probably was a problem too... the idle inmates, especially the long-term inmates at Camp Hill at that time, I think I read somewhere that they felt like they didn't have any programs. There wasn't enough to keep them busy.

Kostelac: That's very true. When you have ... there were too many inmates and not enough space and activities for them. Not enough space in the education building for them to do anything. It wasn't mandatory that they had to have a GED for them to get out, so they just basically laid around... even with parole violators. Parole violators couldn't hold a job, they weren't allowed to. They couldn't do any educational line or anything like that, and, consequently when they sit there and do nothing, then that's when problems start. You can only show movies so much. You can only watch TV so much.

McNaughton: The riot also led to a big change in tool control.

Kostelac: Yes, it did. Before, all of our tools were contained underneath the education building right in the middle of the compound.

McNaughton: Tell me what kind of tools.



Some of the tools inmates had that were found in Kitchen 2.

Kostelac: Inmates had access to blow torches. They had access to an ATV and were riding it around on the second night. They had access to pretty much every tool that you could think of that was there.

McNaughton: Chainsaws? Sledgehammers?

Kostelac: Jackhammers, saws-alls. It was all stored down there. I was glad that they took all of that and moved it outside of the institution. I was glad that they took the keys out of the institution and moved it outside.

What really made the difference, and I think Camp Hill impacted on this, was the fact that they moved the Inmate Records Office out of the center of the jail. Because the inmates torched that place. If they would have torched all of those files... you probably wouldn't figure out what inmates had to do what.

McNaughton: But we did have a Central Office Records Office then...

Kostelac: Yes, but not as detailed... not as up-to-date as what those... the reason that that fire didn't spread, Sue, was simply because those files were packed too tight. There was not enough air for them to go around. That's what saved those files.

McNaughton: How about vehicles inside the perimeter?

Kostelac: Thank God, they got rid of those too.

McNaughton: I do remember watching from my office window a truck drive through one of the inner fences like it was a hot knife through butter.

Kostelac: That was the same truck that I saw. As a matter of fact, when I was a stock clerk I used to drive the truck through the institution. That was common practice at that time. Because you have a more sophisticated inmate now-a-days, they know what those weaknesses are, and they exploit it and the trucks were just another way for them to use to try to break out of jail. One thing that did come out that I saw ... remember I told you that there was an officer that was being jumped on? I actually saw the inmates pick him up, put him into the back of the pick-up truck and drive him to the main gate area. They dropped him off there and then they retreated back.

McNaughton: Not the same inmates that were jumping on him though.

Kostelac: No, a different set of inmates. It did get rid of trucks inside the perimeter that even I questioned in my infancy in corrections as to why we have a vehicle in here.

McNaughton: There are many, many acres inside an institution...

Kostelac: There's other ways to handle it... golf carts. A golf cart won't breach a fence. We got a little smarter about things like that. That's for sure. It also changed, unfortunately, some educational programs for inmates. Inmates weren't getting the college courses that they used to. It stopped a lot of activities for inmates and it really impacted their education also.

McNaughton: I think that usually happens after a major incident... where the DOC and the facility just kind of stops everything to regroup.

Kostelac: Sure. The inmate that I had up in my area went through the Jo Jo Bowen incident down in Graterford, so he knew about riots. One of the things that he told me the most was that inmates get frustrated at various things. It's not because they want to get back at staff, it's because they are trying to send a message to the administration as to what's going on. He said all of the signs for that were in place and they're going to do whatever they can because of the pack mentality to try to get out of that place or to cause it irreparable harm in some way, shape or form. He was right on that.

McNaughton: Did you ever have to testify about the inmate that you came face-to-face with?

Kostelac: No. I did testify at a senate subcommittee hearing and they were asking basically what my particular function was. I don't know how I even got picked for that one. Somebody said just show up here one day, and I did...

McNaughton: And you just told your story.

Kostelac: Yeah.

McNaughton: Talk to me about the affects on you afterward. What kind of emotional or physical effects did this have on you?

Kostelac: For the first few years I was getting up in the middle of the night. I still think about it even today. I still wake up sometimes and I'll look, and I'll see a person's face or I will remember a certain inmate's face... that happened or that I knew about during that time.

McNaughton: I can't imagine standing on a burning building. When you talked about... you said the fire company came and got you. Tell me... exactly how did you get off the roof.

Kostelac: We we made a phone call, it wasn't to the control desk per se. It rolled over out front to where the switchboard operator was. She got in touch with some people through state police and that and the state police verified that there were inmates up on the roof.

McNaughton: And they were able to do that because we had helicopters flying throughout.

Kostelac: Exactly right, but what was really disconcerting was the fact that they deployed snipers. If you ever looked down and you see little red dots on you, that's really kind of like the time that you want to really start to think about your life a lot. They thought we were inmates.

McNaughton: Like you said, some of the officers were wearing inmate uniforms, so there was a lot of uniform switching going on in some cases.

Kostelac: Exactly. That wasn't our case as much as it was just to try to get out of a burning building. Apparently, they must have coordinated, and they sent a guy... I'll never forget this guy... he came up and he was terrified of ladders to begin with, but he identified us and then they reshifted the ladder and then finally we got off that way.

McNaughton: So, it was a fire engine ladder truck?

Kostelac: Literally, it was a fire truck.

McNaughton: So, two stories ... in the dark ... helicopters flying ... fires burning all around and you're going down rung by rung. Were you ... did you go off before the inmates, after the inmates?

Kostelac: Yes. I went off before the inmates. The other inmates were still stuck inside the music area because of the keys being snapped off in there. In fact, later on ... one of the lieutenants told me, they had use a welding torch to get through the doors to get those inmates out.

McNaughton: The broken keys in the locks was a very good idea. Had somebody told you about that? How did you know to do that?

Kostelac: when I first started, I was talking with the locksmith down at the warehouse the one day and he was telling me how he had a key that was jammed up ... it was turned halfway ... it broke off and it couldn't get through, so he had to find a way... he had to cut out the whole thing to get the lock out and that just stuck with me.

McNaughton: Wow. And in your time of emergency, that great thought came to you.

Kostelac: Same thing is true with the air ventilators. We had an escape in RHU where the inmate went through the ventilator shaft. I remembered that... that ventilator shafts are a good way to get out of a jail.

McNaughton: So, you really need to be aware of your surroundings.

Kostelac: Well, situational awareness kicks in. Survival kicks in. You do what you have to do to survive. Literally, in this one... this riot of '89, I really thought I was going to die. I was terrified that I would not see my wife and kids again.

McNaughton: Speaking of which, they're at home watching it on TV or at least your wife is?

Kostelac: Yes.

McNaughton: How did she handle that?

Kostelac: She was terrified. What really helped was the fact that I called from the music department and I told her, I said, "Honey, I am not coming home tonight. We are in the middle of a riot situation. I don't know what's going to happen. I'll get back to you as soon as I can." And that was our last conversation that we had. Nobody even knew that I was up in the music building along with those two other staff members. At that time there was no way that we could account for anybody.

McNaughton: Let's fast forward to your job now, and you train incoming, new employees. What specific areas do you train and how do you use your riot experience in that?

Kostelac: Every class that I teach I relate to the Camp Hill riot.

McNaughton: Do you show video of the riot?

Kostelac: Uh.

McNaughton: Have you watched videos?

Kostelac: Sometimes we do. Sometimes we don't. I show them the state police version occasionally if we have some down time, but that's about it. Most people ask me questions about it.

McNaughton: Like what?

Kostelac: What happened? Where was I? What touched it off? How did it come to an end? The same questions as we are talking about here. And that's why, at least in my position, every lesson plan that I do has some relevancy to the '89 riot or the riots of '82 or '83. There's something in my career... that lesson plan that I use as a case history for people that they can use, such as the breaking off of keys... it's not policy, but common sense sometimes dictates that you have to do something to survive. Getting into a ventilator shaft... or crawling up through a plumbing chase to get to the roof... you can do that in new institutions very easily. Funny, I go into a new institution and the first thing I look for is how to get out of here.

McNaughton: I don't know that we want to share this too much for the inmates that are in there...

Kostelac: It's funny, because when we started building the new cell blocks at Camp Hill, they put ladders into the roof. So, people were pretty smart in construction... I guess they found out what I did and they took it to heart and they used it. There were definitely some physical improvements because of that.

I utilize a lot of situations from Camp Hill to show them that these are things that can happen... these are tell-tale signs that are there... and we actually teach that in some of our courses.

Fundamentals of security... we cover a lot of that.

McNaughton: I don't think we all get that kind of training... when I went through basic training it was five days and it certainly didn't touch on the stuff that the officers and contact staff learn, but maybe that something that should all be reminded of.

Kostelac: I started as a... like I said, I started as a messenger. I went through six weeks of training. I had to go through a week's worth of weapons training and a week's worth of gas training and things like that... defensive tactics. That's how we did it back in those days. They changed it around because of, I guess, money and a lot of other things.

McNaughton: I think as different topics percolate, they bring that to the forefront of training.

Kostelac: Yeah. Of course, we are a reactive agency rather than a proactive agency.

McNaughton: We were talking about, in the middle of the night, you'd wake up. What other ways did your experiences impact you at all? How did you deal with the stress that it brought on to you?

Kostelac: I talked... A lot of it I talked out with my wife. She's familiar with the situation. She knows what it is. So, I talk with her a lot. I don't keep it bottled up at all.

McNaughton: There are some who don't talk at all.

Kostelac: Yes, unfortunately, and I think that's the key to it... how to survive it. There's people that had it worse than me. I know that, and I've talked to those people. Just simply talking about it sometimes makes you feel better. It also brings up some of the hatred you have toward certain people... toward the department... toward inmates. It's changed with the way I deal with inmates. I'm less tolerant with some of the things that inmates do, and I stay on them but I'm nice enough to know that I can carry it out a different way rather than being brutal about it. So, it changed my concept a lot there. It changed my concept on the way that we deal with situations in jail and how quickly we have to deal with situations when they arise rather than trying to let them fester.

It really has changed my whole outlook. Do I still wake up in the middle of the night sometimes? Yeah. I do. I do. I... I won't lie about that. There's still some times I still don't sleep very well at night, and sometimes I second guess the things that I do because of that, but it's a fight every day.

McNaughton: It's amazing how... here we are approaching 30 years, but it's a clear as yesterday.

Kostelac: I will never forget it. I will never forget any riot or situation that I've been in, and I swore that if I were in a position that I could go ahead and help somebody survive it, or live through it, or make it better... I would. I'd like to think that I've done that, because I do have superintendents now that I've trained.

McNaughton: Think of the thousands and thousands of trainees that you addressed over the years.

Kostelac: Yeah. One of the trainees is up here now as your deputy secretary.

McNaughton: Would that be Tabb [Bickell]?

Kostelac: That would be Tabb.

McNaughton: I interviewed Tabb.

Kostelac: Good. Did he tell you about... he got beat up pretty good.

McNaughton: He didn't go into detail, but I cannot imagine being trapped in a switchbox and having those fire bombs coming at you and then you flood the floor to keep yourself from getting on fire and then they try to electrocute you. He pretty much ended his part when he said they pulled him out. We did talk about the fact that they covered his head and changed his clothes and handcuffed him and walked him around... paraded him around the compound.

Now, another thing that I always talk to people about is... could we have another riot?

Kostelac: Sure.

McNaughton: Would it be as bad?

Kostelac: Any day of the week it could happen. It's something that's like a cold. It starts off small and then it grows. If you don't... if you're not proactively looking for it or dealing with the situation, it can explode really fast.

McNaughton: The department since has implemented a lot of different things that can help them keep their thumb on the pulse. They have their weekly status reports where we kind of take a temperature of every facility... the morale of staff... the morale of inmates... we look at grievances – are the numbers up – and commissary purchases. There's a lot of different things that we look at now... and not only at an institution level, but also at a regional deputy and secretary level. So that red flags can go off. We'll try to do all we can to stop it, but ...

Kostelac: I see those reports too they are published [on the DOC's intranet]. You can see the assaults and things like that.

McNaughton: They happen.

Kostelac: It's a part of the business.

McNaughton: Hopefully with the new construction of prisons and retrofitting of all the prisons we have sectioned off the institutions, so it won't be as widespread inside an institution.

Kostelac: Yeah, I hope so. I still would like to see towers come back though.

McNaughton: we still use them during yard out.

Kostelac: Newer institutions don't have them at all unfortunately.

McNaughton: Is there anything else that you remember that you would like to share?

Kostelac: It has affected my life quite a bit. It's made me think a lot more. It's made me... it's changed me as a person.

McNaughton: What do you think about more often than you did before?

Kostelac: I think about surviving situations. I think about people that are going in right now that have to face it brand new and how they are going to survive and that worries me. That's what really keeps me up at night a lot. If what I am saying... will it affect them ... will they take heed, will they follow...

McNaughton: If somebody finds themselves in a situation where they are in the middle of a riot, what advice would you offer?

Kostelac: Run like hell. Seriously. I tell people wear Nikes [sneakers] inside the jail, because you will never know when you'll have to run. You can't take on a whole bunch of inmates, and there's got to be a point in time when you have to run. Know your situation. Know where you are and how to get out. It can happen at any time. Inmates are inmates, and I don't care how much we try to treat them... or how much we try to do for them... whether there's five of them or 50 of them, they are still going to fight. They are still going to cause you a problem in some shape or form.

McNaughton: And if you can't run?

Kostelac: If you can't run find a place to hide. I remember one officer that we pulled out of K Block, he was inside an inmate's locker/closet. He hid in there as best he could. They beat his legs unmercifully to the point that he had to have vein reconstruction. But at least he had the rest of his body.

Know your area. Know how to get out. Know where to go. Know who to turn to.

McNaughton: That's good advice not only for an institutional or prison setting, but also for in the community now in today's climate where we have these mass shootings going on.

Kostelac: Yeah. My father-in-law had had a conversation about that... school shootings all the time. He was a grizzled old corrections officer too, and he was laughing at a bucket of stones that would be kept in a classroom. He asked, "Why would they want to keep a bucket of a bunch of stones in there?" I looked at him and I said, "If you can't run and you can't hide and you've got somebody coming after you, what are you going to do?" and he said, "Well, you're going to fight." I said, "There's where the bucket of stones come in." So, it made a lot of sense.

McNaughton: Gere, I want to thank you.

Kostelac: My pleasure, Sue.

McNaughton: We'll make sure that this is shared for future generations.

Kostelac: I hope so.

McNaughton: Thank you.

Kostelac: Thank you.

END