

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

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

Interview Transcript

McNaughton: Welcome to the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' Oral History Project where record the oral histories of individuals who were involved in important DOC events. 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 17, 2019, is Jack Neyhard, who worked for Commonwealth Media Services at the time of the riot. Thanks for joining us, Jack.

Neyhard: Susan, Thanks for having me.

McNaughton: Jack, where were you on Wednesday, October 25, 1989, when you learned about the riot, and what was your involvement?

Neyhard: We were in our office that day, and a member of our staff had a husband who worked over at Camp Hill. He had called and said, "We're not really sure what's going on, but there are some problems." What they did was, they put us on alert in case we were needed for the press conferences and the various other things that CMS did at the time.

Being a neighbor... I live close to the prison. We are across the street from the Allen Middle School, which is basically maybe two miles away, I immediately called my wife and said, "Let the neighbor know that they should get the kids in the house..." because they were watching our two daughters at the time... "there might be a problem over at the prison."

About an hour later, we got the phone call, and basically said, "We need you guys over here. Let's go."

What I remember most was first of all going over the South Bridge over the Susquehanna River, and seeing the smoke. It was amazing how much smoke there was at the time. We pulled in and immediately began setting up for press conferences. But it was really a surreal situation in that you saw it was utter chaos. There were just people running around, and as the day went on it got a little bit worse.

Then it finally settled down, and I remember going home and watched the news and saw all of the coverage. Being so close to the prison, I kind of nodded off on my couch. My daughter, who was probably 5 or 6 at the time, comes over to me and shakes me and said, "Daddy, wake up." I

was kind of nodding off and said, “What’s the matter?” She said, “Daddy, the men at the prison are being bad.” I said, “No, Honey. That was last night. Everything is fine. They have it straightened out.” She said, “No, Daddy. Look.” I sat up, and you could see Route 15 from my house, and all we saw were the tops of these state police cruisers... the old bubble lights... flying down the highway.

The phone rang about 10 minutes later and said, “Ok, time to come back.”

McNaughton: Wow. When you talk about setting up for press conferences... this isn’t in a building, where was the press conference area?

Neyhard: We were probably 100 yards away from the institution itself... across the street in a very large field. As a result, the media came in and there was room for them to set and do what they had to do. In hindsight, it might have been a problem allowing them to be so close, because it gave them a lot of access that normally, in a situation like that, you may not want people to have access to a situation that close. I could recall the media doing some rather strange things.

McNaughton: Such as?

Neyhard: I was a member of the media prior to working for the state, and I can recall one of the TV stations had gotten their hands on a blueprint of the prison and was broadcasting, live, where they were forming with the police, [saying], “They might do this, and they might do that.” My first reaction was, “My God, those people in there [the inmates] are watching the news. What are you guys doing? Somebody could really get hurt. You’re telegraphing what the proposed plan was to retake the institution.” Again, there were a lot of reporters... you could tell the young ones, because they were really hyper and excited. Some of the veterans who were there realized the gravity of the situation and were a little more laid back.

McNaughton: I remember hearing stories about reporters going right up to the fence line and talking to inmates that weren’t involved in the rioting through the fences.

Neyhard: Yes. That’s true. I remember that, because it was such a bizarre situation. Again, you had people running all over. I remember the flames were probably the highest I’d ever seen in my life, and it was just this mass chaos. Down in the corner of the yard... I think it was the south end... there were a couple of guys [inmates] playing basketball. It just looked so strange. One of the reporters went over and said, “What are you guys doing?” They [the inmates] said, “Please, please, take our picture, because we want them to see that we had nothing to do with this.”

McNaughton: Talk to me about some of the briefings that you helped [with]. What did you do? [Did you] set up the podium, sound...

Neyhard: Yeah, we basically had the podium set up and something called a mult-box, which is where all the media would plug into the microphone. The advantage being, I had the switch of when the microphone was on or off. A lot of times, in that situation, if you’re standing near a podium and the microphone is on, some people may say stuff that you don’t necessarily want others to hear. So, I had a signal with the [press secretary] Ken Robinson at the time, and he

would look over and I would nod and then I would turn the mics on and they would begin the briefings.

Ken was... I gotta tell you... a real friend, but a true professional. There we are... 100 yards away from mayhem, and there's Ken controlling this press conference... giving out the information he could, and the whole time remaining calm, collected... unlike some other people who were, again, they were amped up and running around... and it's like, "OK, we have this situation. Let's do what we have to do."



Ken Robinson

McNaughton: Then John Palakovich was the spokesperson for the prison, and he was doing the initial briefings, but there reached a point where he was so exhausted, and he responded to a reporter's question in a way that the press secretary, Ken Robinson, said, "Yeah, we need to give him a break." Do you recall that at all?

Neyhard: No, not at all. At some point there was an individual who was a participant of the press conference, and in between briefings he was walking around talking to reporters saying, "You have to ask about the dead bodies. There's five dead bodies in there." In fact, he had asked me twice, and again, being a former reporter, I looked at him and said, "I'm not a reporter. Go somewhere else." Again, he tried to get some of the veteran guys to ask the question, and they didn't bite. Finally, they had a young individual who, in the middle of the briefings, said, "I have a question. What about the dead bodies?" I can recall Ken Robinson giving this look like... looking around at everybody, and this individual stepped in front of Kenny and said, "Uh, that's a rumor. It can't be substantiated."

McNaughton: So the same guy that was going around asking people to ask that question, then jumped in front of Ken... between Ken and the camera and then said, "That was a rumor."

Neyhard: Yes. I think he wanted to get on television, because everybody was running live feeds at the time. He wasn't getting questions, so he planted a question knowing of course that it had no basis of fact.

McNaughton: Wow. I do remember after that, Ken had called this individual up to his office and pretty much told him how it was going to work from that point on, and I don't think we saw that person anywhere near Ken or any of the prison spokespeople after that. Interesting factoid there.

Neyhard: Again, in Ken's case, he was a true professional. Working at corrections, you rarely have good news coming from that department. From what I could remember, he was delivering the message he was given, but he did it in such a calm way, that he more or less helped the situation by saying, "Look, it's bad. We're doing what we have to do, and we'll get it straightened out."

McNaughton: Let's talk about technology for a minute. How did the reporters report their stories back to and/or communicate back to their news outlets? Did we have cell phones then?

Neyhard: I don't believe so. I remember some telephones being brought in for that reason, because back then the internet was pretty new. You didn't have the live feeds that you have today. A lot of the local stations had microwave transmitters that they used to send video back. For as far as the phones, yeah, it wasn't like it is today. Today it's so instant, that you're on in a second. Back then it took a while. I can recall people scrambling asking to use phones, because that was the only way to do it.



News media set up in the field across the street from the prison's entrance.

McNaughton: During the riot, especially the second night, the local TV stations preempted the network nightly broadcast to cover the riot. They were live, and that was our first real experience with live, 24/7 coverage of an incident like that.

Neyhard: You might be right. I still have a tape of NBC News with Tom Brokaw. It was a lead story that night... Prison Burns in Pennsylvania.

McNaughton: I remember when he called actually, or maybe it was his producer... Ken was down in another office, and I had to put that person on hold and went running, "Tom Brokaw's calling on the phone!" It was amazing. Amazing coverage.

McNaughton: Talk to me about... the first day it started around 3 p.m. and then it was over by around 11:30 p.m., but I think they had a briefing into early morning hours. When did you go home then... after that first night?

Neyhard: The nice thing was I lived 5 minutes away. I went home, and I slept... and we went up the next morning. Then the briefings continued throughout the time that we were there.

McNaughton: When you went back [on the second night] Thursday night into Friday, were you there for like 24 hours straight. How did that work for you?

Neyhard: Primarily after the last briefing, we were sent home. I remember taking all my gear home with me, because I showed up in my own vehicle. I had all the equipment with me.

McNaughton: Amazing looking back at it, isn't it?

Neyhard: It's funny. It's 30 years, and it seems like yesterday. The only thing I would add is the second day, if there was a humorous spot to this whole situation... I can recall this mountain of a man... state trooper walking up to me at the briefing site. He had a shotgun that looked like a Howitzer. I looked up at this guy and he goes, "Sir, I've been assigned to this area. Where do you need me?" I pointed to the ground right next to me and said, "Right there would be fine." The reporters were going, "What is this?" I said, "If something goes down and we can't have any briefings, so, I need this nice gentleman standing next to me." It's just amazing. It seems like yesterday.

McNaughton: Jack, I think that's it. Did you have anything else that you wanted to share?

Neyhard: I don't think so.

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