

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Jerry Kambic
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 we work to record the oral histories of current and former state 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 19, 2019, is Jerry Kambic, who worked for Commonwealth Media Services at the time of the riots.

Thank you for joining us, Jerry.

Kambic: You're welcome.

McNaughton: Can you tell us what you remember about the riot – where were you when it started, and then, tell us how you became involved in it?

Kambic: Well, we were... The riot was two parts, for me at least. There was the original part, and then it flared up a second time.

The first time when it broke loose, we had been given a call to go over and see if we could help out with the media and possibly shoot some videotape of what was going on to document what was happening.

It was very confusing, because, you know, it's not every day that you get invited to ... or asked to come over to videotape a prison riot. We knew nothing about what a prison riot was.

So, we went over to set up... there was a media area... that was set up, and we were going to set up that for the media. And then I was invited to go to the administration building, because the roof looked down into the actual facility, so you had a vantage point and you could videotape.



So, we went over there, and we started videotaping the first day of what ... you know... things were going on. It was, for me, it was very interesting. It was very Hollywood like, because I had never seen anything like that before. We were videotaping what was happening.

The first day... things seemed to settle down, and it was handled, I thought, pretty well by Corrections. But then the second time when it flared back up, as I recall, believe it or not, I was in a bar in downtown Harrisburg with some media friends of mine. A friend of mine got a call. He worked for WGAL-TV 8. He said, "Hey, the prison thing is ripping loose again." So, I just went to my office, got my stuff and drove over there, because I knew the drill of what we were doing and showed up and by then there was like flames higher than I've ever seen in a fire. I mean it was... it was... things were really out-of-hand that second go-around.

So, we stayed out the whole night into the morning. It was a pretty long day. We shot videotape that was amazing. Flames that were shooting into the air. Guards were tied up in the yard. It was... it was just unbelievable. I remember sitting there as I was shooting thinking, "This is just unbelievable." I had never experienced anything that dramatic in my life and we just recorded it. We were just sitting there recording what was going on.

McNaughton: How many hours do you think you were there non-stop that second time?

Kambic: I remember I did a 24-hour stint of whenever I last slept. I remember that. By the time we were done, I had been up like 24 or 25 hours. So, it was... it was... it was long, but it wasn't one of those things that you could sort of come and go and have coffee in between. It was pretty intense.

The folks who were there did a great job. It was something that probably for those of us who weren't in corrections, we were just, you know... it was just the basic. It was traumatic. It was destructive. Every emotion I remember going through my mind thinking, "This is just unbelievable." I wasn't thinking what was the reason. It was just so dramatic. It was like... To be honest with you... the second night, there were these huge flames and all of this stuff going on and people were welding doors... they had welders. It was like, you know, it sort of looked like it was more organized the second time. There were inmates that were being destructive, and I was just thinking, you know, not every inmate was involved.

You had several groups, you could tell, just by what was going on in the yard. It wasn't totally organized. There was some organizational people who were being destructive, and but I don't... they were trying to figure out... "ok, we started this... what are we gonna do with this." You could actually tell the different groups throughout the two days. Some people were wanting to hurt guards, and we actually videotaped a person who punched a guard who was blindfolded, sitting in a chair in the yard. And then there were other people who were trying to protect the guard.

It was interesting because it wasn't like it was very organized for them, it was just total chaos. I've never experienced total anarchy while videotaping, and it was kind of scary. I was glad I was on a roof with a fence in between us, because you just thought, "My, God. This is anarchy. This was just everyone gone crazy in there."

And then it just ... jump ahead to the end when the State Police had come in. It was amazing to me to this day, because I know there were a lot of rumors, but I was always amazed that no one actually died during the prison riot. There were so many opportunities for people to have gotten killed.

I remember the most dramatic thing was the guy they brought out on the stretcher who had had a heart attack and some of the inmates organized his release. They bring him out and the State Police then took him over, and they went just a few yards and they put the stretcher down. I thought, "Oh my, God, I wonder what's going on." The guy gets up and runs. He actually got up and ran. So, the whole thing was fake. I think some of the inmates orchestrated this to get the one guard out. I believe it's on videotape.

I haven't seen the videotape, because after we shot it, it had been taken to and given to the Blue Ribbon Commission to review, and I think State Police had got it and maybe even Corrections used it for training, but I have never seen the videotape. After we shot it we made dubs for various groups that were going to review the prison riot, but we had never... I have never seen the videotape I shot since that day. I would love to review it. It would bring back a lot of memories and probably other stories.

I do remember a guard sitting on a chair, and them blindfolding him and a guy came up and punched him as hard as he could in the back of the head, and I thought, "Wow. That was really cowardice to do that to somebody who is clearly defenseless at this point."

Then I remember the guy they brought out on the stretcher thinking, "Oh, that poor guy is, you know, in a bad way," and then they set it down and he got up and ran, and I went, "Oh, that whole thing was a ruse." Apparently, that guard... some of the inmates wanted to protect this guy so he wouldn't get killed and they did this whole thing where he had a heart attack and the whole thing was fake. Either he was just making it up or some of the inmates knew about it. That would be an interesting story to find out who that guy was and the background of that.

As journalists we never got a real opportunity, and I was working for the Commonwealth then, we never got the opportunity to go in and try to talk to some of the folks about some of the stories. Things we saw but never knew what the backstories were. It would be very interesting to get ahold of those people. I know it wasn't one of those things that people were looking to, at the time, let media go in and talk about what caused it.

There are plenty of reports that were written and stories, I'm sure, about everything that went on, and I know we changed prisons and the way they are made up now vs how the structures were made up and I know there were a lot of positives that came out of it. I know the current guy that's running [Corrections] over there – fast forward to the future – is doing an amazing job, I think, with corrections. I think we're treating people a little more like human beings... inmates, of course, but still addressing some of the situations that probably led to that whole nightmare there.

McNaughton: Let me take you back to the rooftop. So, everything's on fire. Smoke's coming at you. Helicopters are circling nonstop – State Police helicopters. How did all of that, plus watching... you saw things that many of us didn't see... how did that impact you emotionally afterward? Did you have nightmares?

Kambic: What is interesting is because I had experienced something early on in my career that was probably *the most* traumatic thing that I have ever... um, that anyone could experience... I was covering the CTA trial when I was still in the media, and Bud Dwyer was the treasurer at the time. He called a press conference, and as we all know historically, pulled out a gun and shot himself. So, having seen *that* traumatic experience, that really set me up for what you could see in the media. I'll be honest, though, I remember the first day... I forget the timeline because time has passed... so, it's good you're doing this now and to jog people's memories before their memories are gone. The first day it was interesting what was going on, but that sort of, as I recall, they seemed to kind of figure out what was going on and things calmed down.

On the second night, when I was in the bar and went over there, I saw flames... and I used to be a volunteer firefighter and we had a lot of lumber fires, lumberyard fires and old houses... and I had never seen flames that high in my life. I still haven't seen flames that high. I just remember getting on that rooftop and thinking, "Oh, My God. This is like Apocalypse Now," you know, the movie. I was just like this is crazy. I just remember going... I kept thinking to myself, "Is this staged?" My mind wouldn't accept what I was seeing because I had never seen anything. It's sort of like when you see something you've never seen before and it's dramatic and you take a moment to go, "Is this real?" It's like seeing a major car crash in front of you or something you've never seen before... for a second your mind is going, "Is this real?" It's like something you only see in a movie... how dramatic. It was just pretty crazy.

McNaughton: I remember, after the first night, I did go home. It was around 11:30 and I remember crying to my husband saying, "Did this really happen?" and he said, "Yeah, it did." So, I remember, too, going into a coworker's office and I was like, "Hey, is this like really a big deal?" You always hear talk about riots and stuff, and I just... I guess I wanted to know -- on a scale of like riots -- how bad is this. And he was like, "Oh, yeah, this is really bad."

Kambic: Yeah, because you see stories like Attica and different prison riots and how they ended. I'm just amazed. I mean, you were there. I'm just amazed that no one was killed. As much destruction that happened... and people were injured. We know people were injured.

I remember being on the rooftop... one of the more dramatic things ... you just jarred a memory ... was when the State Police had come in to, you know... this is enough... enough is enough. They came in the other side of the yard from where we were, and they were shooting warning shots. They weren't shooting *at* the people, they were shooting shotgun blasts in the air, and what they probably they didn't realize is that what goes up must come down, and we started getting pelted by... thank goodness... BB's from shotgun blasts on the roof. They stung a little bit, but they weren't too bad, because obviously coming down they lost their velocity, because they were shooting them in the air. They weren't trying to kill anybody... they were shooting warning shots just to ... because when most people hear a shotgun blasts they are going to hit the

dirt and knock off what they are doing. The State Police, I thought, showed amazing, amazing control.

All of a sudden there are guys coming out of the one building ... I called them the ninjas, because these are State Police guys that were dressed in black that were like a SERT team, I guess, or something. They came out of the one building that was inside, and I was like, "How did they get in there, because the other guys were coming through the gate."

There were some pretty cool operations stuff going on that we never got to ask questions about or know, because all of a sudden there were guys rolling out of buildings... that were obviously law enforcement, and I was like, "Wow. I wonder how they got in there." It was pretty amazing stuff.

We don't have the cameras today... today we would have drones. We would have cameras that would do better at night. [Back then we] we're shooting with old cameras that had chips in them ... digital, but they weren't really great at low light. That's why, I think it would be fascinating to play the video for folks who were involved and ... it would jog your memory and you'd go, "Oh, yeah, I completely forgot about that."

Again, your mind retains what your mind saw. I see the dramatic points in my mind still when you talked about it, but I don't think the long hours that we all put in, the details, the chaos that was going on... and I think it was probably a life-changing event for a lot of people because I think most of us that were involved go, "I don't know what caused this, but we need to make sure *this* doesn't happen again." Thank God, I don't think we've had any other problems in the Commonwealth since then. It was a dramatic learning experience for a lot of us.

McNaughton: Did you have anything else that you wanted to mention?

Kambic: I'm sure, Sue, between you and I, that we could sit down with a beer and probably talk for hours about different things that we remember. It's good you're doing this now, because, over time, you forget little things. Like, Jack Neyhard was there down in the media area, and I remember there was one guy walking around saying, "Oh, there's dead bodies. Ask them about the dead bodies." There was a lot of rumors going on. I wasn't down in the media site, because I was on the roof, but Jack Neyhard would be a good one to talk to... just to talk about the media people and how they didn't know what was going on, and there were people spreading rumors. He'd be a good guy to talk to actually.

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