

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: John McCullough  
Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots**  
Interview Date: September 18, 2019  
Interviewer: DOC Communications Director Susan McNaughton

**Interview Transcript**

**McNaughton:** Hello, I'm Susan McNaughton the Communications Director for the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, and I'm working a project where we collect oral histories, specifically about the 1989 Camp Hill Prison Riot. However, we would be remiss if we didn't mention an incident that took place prior to that at SCI Rockview. Talking to us today, September 18, 2019, about the Rockview incident is John McCullough. Thanks for joining us, John.

**McCullough:** Hello.

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

**McCullough:** I started as a social work intern at the old Eastern State Penitentiary in 1967. I was there 1967 to 1968. I was in the federal system for several years, and then I came back to Rockview as the director of treatment in 1974. By the way, I got back to Rockview because I had known Doc Joe [Dr. Joseph Mazurkiewicz at Eastern ... who later went on to be superintendent of Rockview for many years]. I was the director of treatment there until late 1989, and then, after the Camp Hill Riot, I was appointed the acting deputy superintendent for treatment at Camp Hill, when they fired the three... the two deputies and the superintendent. I came back to Rockview as the deputy superintendent for treatment. I went, in 1995, to SCI Houtzdale as the superintendent there for eight years. That last year as the superintendent there, I was a supervising superintendent... they used to divide it up, so I had three other institutions that reported to me. Then I was the deputy secretary for the western region from 2003 to 2004. Then I got out.

**McNaughton:** Ok. Wow, that's a long career. Congratulations on all that you did. So, let's talk about the Rockview incident. You had told me off line that it happened in February of 1989, so tell me what happened and its importance to the leading up to the Camp Hill Riot.



**John McCullough**

**McCullough:** I remember the system at that time... prison systems go through periods of just general unrest. As I remember, there was any number of institutions that were kind of uneasy. I didn't particularly feel that at Rockview, and I spent a lot of time out with the inmates, but I didn't feel that we had any real issues there.

It all started... as a lot of these do... with messing with an inmate that shouldn't be messed with. I don't know what start it. There was a very minor misconduct... it was either a shirttail out or he was walking across the grass area where he couldn't. They yelled at him. He ran. **You NEVER, EVER run after an inmate** unless it's a drastic situation, because it creates cat-and-mouse. It looks unfair.

So, they chased the inmate into C Block, and C Block was on its way up to dinner. This happened around 3:30 in the afternoon. They were lined up ready to go to dinner. He ran in among the crowd. The other inmates pushed the officers off saying, "You don't want to deal with this. This isn't cool."

Again, you don't chase people. You get them when you own the place... at 6 o'clock, 10 o'clock... don't grab people out of population.

Then he [the inmate] goes over to dinner, and they pull him out of the line and start grabbing him to cuff him up. He resists, and the crowd reacted and jumped on the officers and the gate officer... Rockview at the time had a gate officer who could open the gate from the dining room out into the yard. If you know what Rockview looks like, the dining room... as you're facing toward the main cell blocks... to your left is C Block, to the front is Education Building, to the right was the old B Block...

Anyway, he [the gate officer] hits the thing, and these angry inmates come streaming out though the door. About that time, somebody had called the browns... maintenance and CI guys were on their way home... somebody said, "There's a problem, please come in." These guys... a lot of them are older men... they start coming up the walk along C Block, and the inmates just charged them. None of these men from maintenance or CI ever mistreated inmates, never did anything wrong. They're [the inmates] used to these instructors helping them out. They tore them apart. I don't know how many of them they knocked on the ground. It was just this very angry, thoughtless reaction.

We were in the DW Building [Deputy Wardens Building] at the time. It was me Bill Love; Tony D'Angelo, who's since dead; Bob Myers, who's since dead ... he later became the superintendent at Rockview; Terri Whitman; Danny Harder ... and we went out in the yard and ... by the way a lot of the inmates are afraid. They are streaming down the walk trying to get back into the cell blocks. It was most of the C Block guys, and after they had beaten all of these people up, they just kind of stopped... like, "What in the hell did we just do?"

There were some really good officers out there... John Kephart I think was there... because we generally had a fairly good relationship with the inmates.

Anyway, they surrounded us and just yelled and yelled and yelled and yelled. What could you do? They yelled at us. We got about 20 inmates separated, got them in the Education Building to

talk. And there was an inmate called "Fat Freddie," who had kind of taken over. We said to Freddie, "Hey look, the way to get out of this, is for everybody to go back to the cell blocks." I think they ran out of steam. They realized, "Oh, we beat up these poor browns." So, they go back to C Block.

Then the question becomes, "What do you do? Do you lock down?" And by the way, the department wasn't ready for that kind of stuff back then. We didn't have CERT teams. We didn't have the means of locking a lot of stuff down like we do now.

So, we went over to C Block and kind of walked through there... the inmates are settled down. I think we should have locked down, but we didn't. We actually fed that night and fed the next morning, and there were no further problems.

But the problem is... it breaks the myth that staff are invincible. They saw how quick staff would go down when they'd get hit. There were a lot of injuries. I bet you there were 40-some officers and CI people hurt.

We transferred a couple guys that were troublemakers, but by and large, we had excellent block officers. I remember calling over to the West Wing sergeant and saying, "Can you releases... these guys aren't going to give you any trouble?" This isn't our block, this is C Block, they did it.

It kind of piddled out after that.

The trouble is... it gets the taste of blood out into the air.

So, that's what happened there.

**McNaughton:** How long did that overall attack last?

**McCullough:** It happened right as they were doing the first line, browns were going home... I'd say it was about 10 of 4 that it happened. We were back into the cell blocks, I think by 5, so we may have had an hour... an hour and 10 minutes out there. They started milling around, and then as we separated some of them and got them into this one place and ordered them into the Education Building... a lot of times, in these situations, some of your people... certain inmates will take charge. This wasn't planned. The inmates who took charge said, "This isn't going anywhere. Let's just call it a day."

**McNaughton:** How many inmates would you say were involved?

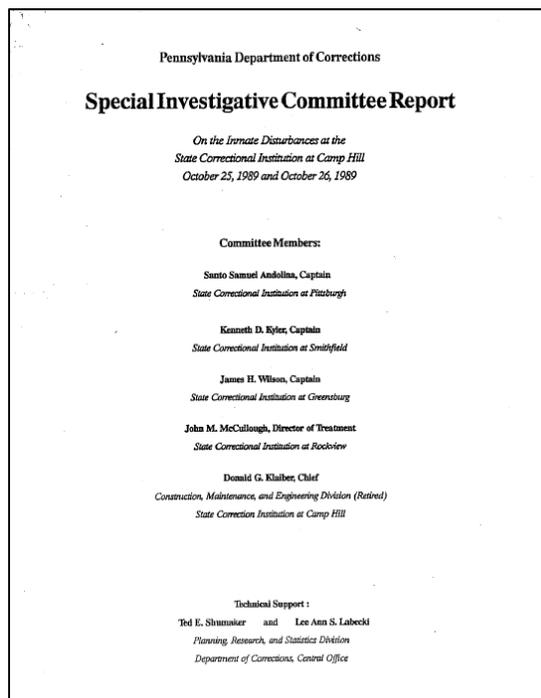
**McCullough:** A hundred. I mean they poured... they poured out of that dining room. They were angry, and again... why p\*ss around with a guy over a shirttail? By the way, the whole thing at Camp Hill started at E Block about a pair of RHU flops.

**McNaughton:** Great, I want to get to that soon, but first. I wanted to ask about Rockview... was the inside of the compound... inside the perimeter... open... did we have a lot of internal fencing there?

**McCullough:** Yeah. There was no way... they could have actually... if they had wanted to, there was no fences cutting off the interior of that jail. So, they could have gone... actually they had the jail. They had the jail.

**McNaughton:** Whew. We know that that happened... we think in February of 1989; and then I talked to Ben Varner about the Huntingdon October 23, 1989, situation. Setting you up for Camp Hill... we know that on Wednesday, October 25, 1989, at the E Gate, that started the first night of rioting at Camp Hill, which went until about 11:30/midnight that Wednesday. Everything was supposedly secured. The next day people reported to work on the 26<sup>th</sup>, and around 6:30 p.m. on the 26<sup>th</sup> of October, the inmates took control of the institution at Camp Hill again, and that finally came to an end around dawn on Friday, October 27<sup>th</sup>.

As a result of all of that, there were hearings and everything. The superintendent was relieved, as were his two deputy superintendents. Commissioner Owens appointed Cresson Superintendent Jeff Beard to come and head Camp Hill, and I guess he brought you along. Tell me, from that point on... well, back up a little bit, talk to me about what started it, what your whole role was in investigating it and also as being deputy superintendent shortly thereafter.



**McCullough:** There were four of us who were called down to do an internal investigation. It was me, Ken Kyler, Sam Andolino and I think James Moore [it was James H. Wilson, captain at SCI Greensburg], he was a black administrative captain at Greensburg... wonderful, wonderful man.

We interviewed a whole bunch of people... we wrote a report. We went through the jail and things like that.

The trouble is that you hate to access blame on these things. The inmates are obviously discontented. You can see the skyrocketing... when you have requests slips going up that are complaints, grievances going up and misconducts going up... you've got an issue. You have to address the area where that issue is.

So, there's a number of things that p\*ssed them [the inmates] off. There was something with the lunch

baskets and something about the med lines. I can't tell you what the internal place was in there... I know that when we got there, the staff were enormously angry. They felt they'd been betrayed, and I think they were surprised at the ferocity of the inmates. I certainly was. I mean the place inside there... it was amazing what they could rip down and things like that.

I don't want to set blame. I know that there were many internal staffing issues that were going on, but the people you've talked to know a whole lot better about that than I do.

**McNaughton:** You talked about the fact that you don't chase after an inmate and that you don't cause a problem over something minor. Then you said what really sparked off the E Gate thing at Camp Hill was...what did you say?

**McCullough:** They guy came in through the gate with what are called RHU flops... in other words, you don't let them have shoes in the RHU... they have these flops on so they can't kick up. The officer at E Gate started getting on this guy about this thing of flops. Why? I mean all you had to do was say, "Hey, man, you shouldn't have them on," and go on about your business. If you're going to write a misconduct, do it later. You don't pick on these guys for small things.

**McNaughton:** And this was at a point there were 400 other inmates were behind him.

**McCullough:** Oh yeah, yard out was coming in. Then, I guess the guy sucker punched whoever this officer was. Of course, the trouble is, once you draw blood, and they're p\*ssed off because of the unfairness of the situation... you're going to have an issue, and they did.

**McNaughton:** Right.

**McCullough:** And again, they beat up people they liked. I don't know if you remember Lt. Chapman, we called him Chappy. What a wonderful man, and he's a black guy, and he said, "Why'd they beat me up? I didn't do anything to them?"

**McNaughton:** Yeah, it's just being at the wrong place at the right [wrong] time.

**McCullough:** Wrong place, wrong time, and you represent the authority.

**McNaughton:** So, we know what happened at the Camp Hill riots, and we know that most of the prison was destroyed. Then Jeff Beard comes along and he brings you along. Tell me what it was like to rebuild that facility, to help the staff get back on track with where they should be... that kind of stuff.

**McCullough:** I think that the sad thing about this is that that was a WONDERFUL staff. When you look at the talent they had inside of there and that those people came back in and worked... the only... let me go through this... the commissioned officers were excellent – Kerstetter, Stottlemeyer... that whole group... medical was excellent – they're all back in there working. Activities Department, Food Service, the counseling people, the drug and alcohol people ... they had a lot of really fine people there. But they had been abused by those two deputies who frankly were boys. Then they got abused by the inmates.

So, what you had were deflated, depressed people. When you lose a jail, the first thing they say is, "What did I do? Why is it my fault?" The thing is that this is a very high-talented group, and all you had to do was get them moving again.

So, basically what Ken and I did... Ken had more work than I did, because the tool policy was all messed up... the key policy was all messed up... so he had to work out a lot of the policies. My job, basically, was just... [the fact that] I'm not Terry Henry... and just helping these people to get moving again and to regain their confidence.

I was proud to work with those folks. I could name names right down the line of people that were strong and worked and helped get that place together again. So, the name of the game was, “become functioning again.” Get the programs started, get the people working again. The CDCC, which was run by Petruccio, great shape... they didn’t miss a beat, because they had wonderful people in there. But the thing is you try to get a little bit of education going. You try to get the drug and alcohol people to start doing stuff. You get the employment thing working again. You start staffing inmates again to get them working. The order is to get them back toward a normal work day, and they [the employees] responded quickly. They’re good people down there.

We had little interims. We had several like mini incidents down there. There was a period when they got out of their cells in D Block, which wasn’t very good [background noise on John’s end]. They were able to defeat the... there’s no rebar in D Block. So, what happens is they can just cut through the damn bricks. So, there’s a period where they’re chopping their way out of the block. There were a couple issues over in J Block, where they got rowdy and things like that. So, we had a couple of aftershocks.

I think, by and large, we did alright.

**McNaughton:** Yeah, and you rebuilt a facility that is totally... completely different from what it was pre-riot.

**McCullough:** Oh yeah. I don’t think... of course the place was destroyed. We didn’t have any Education Building left; kitchen 2 was destroyed. I left in July, so I left before any major construction went on... rebuilding the blocks. But most of the stuff I did was with the staff and try to get the staff back on the board again.

**McNaughton:** Right. So, overall... they bounced back, like you said, pretty quickly and because they were great employees to begin with, they just came back fine?

**McCullough:** Oh, yeah. There’s a lot of people that took some damage. And some of those poor guys who were caught inside those cages... what do they call those...

**McNaughton:** Switchboxes.

**McCullough:** The people trapped in the burning buildings. There were many individual acts of heroism. I could go down the list of names from counselors to psychologists and the people I supervised, who just... they just needed somebody to guide them and appreciate them instead of bullying them. And that’s what had happened. They’d been abused before the riot ever happened.

**McNaughton:** John, do you have a psychological background?

**McCullough:** No, I’m a social worker.

**McNaughton:** I was wondering how you knew how to deal with these people. I guess you just got to meet them where they’re at and deal with each one individually and help them through...

**McCullough:** Well, some people had trouble coming back. What you do is, you meet them at the front gate and you walk through with them. They get accustomed again. The thing is regaining their confidence and regaining their confidence around the inmates. Ken Kyler and I both had spent a lot of time with inmates. Ken was very well respected among the inmates, and so, I think, as long as we were out there and the other staff, they could go along and be with the inmates. I think about... Joyce Korman was there. She was excellent. Jeff Ditty... Tony Petruccio... Don Kelchner, he was right in the middle of it. I don't think we did anything magic. I think we had experience with corrections, we had experience with bad situations. I think that that helped us.

**McNaughton:** I know I talked to Jeff Beard about it, and he said when Owens said, "We'd like you to come down and come to Camp Hill," he [Beard] said he'd do it if he could bring the right team with him... and you and Ken and the others that you mentioned was the right team. So, had he not been able to bring you and Ken Kyler along, it may not have been such a successful or as quick a recovery as it was. So, I'm glad he was able to bring you along.

**McCullough:** I'll be a little more modest than that. There were natural leaders among that group. I think after the confusion, they just needed some outside people to look at it... I think they did just fine, because there were some real natural leaders down there, who would come forward eventually.

**McNaughton:** Thank you for taking time to talk to me about these two issues. Is there any advice you would like to... as we wrap this up... any advice you would like to give to listeners who may be working in corrections about how to get through a situation, an incident, a riot?

**McCullough:** I think you're always going to have incidents. That's just part of corrections. You're going to have things where people get hit, where there's work strikes or hunger strikes, or yard fights... that's going to happen. I think the key to this... if you have reasonable relationships with the inmates... and what I mean is you hold them accountable, but you're alright with them. I don't know how to put that... where inmates respect you and they know you're going to enforce the rules, but they also know that you're going to take care of them... make sure they get to their meals, they get their boots fixed, and that kind of stuff. I think that that... a lot of times... that relationship holds them from taking the place over, because they think, "Wait, I'm not going to hit this block sergeant, the guy got me on the phone the other day."

The other thing... don't play with inmates. Don't mess with them. Don't make them look bad in front of their fellows. Because then they have to fight. They are forced to react.

**McNaughton:** Great advice. I want to thank you so much for participating.

**McCullough:** Sure.

END