

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Donald Kelchner
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 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, October 8, 2019, is Donald Kelchner. Thanks for joining us, Don.

McNaughton: Before we begin, could you please provide us with an overview of your DOC career?

Kelchner: I began my Department of Corrections in 1978. I then transferred to Rockview in 1985 to serve as a corrections counselor 2. I was promoted to corrections counselor supervisor at SCI Camp Hill in October 1985, and I held that position until being named Camp Hill's corrections classification treatment manager in September 1990. In March 1993, I was named deputy superintendent at SCI Muncy, I was appointed as superintendent in July 1998. I returned to SCI Camp Hill as superintendent in March 2002, and held that position until I retired in December 2007.

McNaughton: It's around 3 p.m. on Wednesday, October 25, 1989. Where are you and what's happening?

Kelchner: The inmates had started to set the buildings on fire, including the commissary at the end of the education building. We got word that there were people who needed to be gotten out of the education building. So, a number of us ... Jim Auxer and Dave Hoffman were some of them... we went over to the education building... we had 36" oak sticks, and we went over to get the staff out of there. We did that.



Donald Kelchner

Then after that contact was made through the control center, I think by Booker and McKelvie [these are inmates]. Terry Henry decided to take over negotiations

McNaughton: He just decided that on his own?

Kelchner: Yeah, pretty much. He took over and did that, and we set up negotiations to be done [with the inmates]. We set that up in front of the education building. There were a number of tables set up across the roadway there in front of the education building. Terry [Henry] was there, myself and Kirk Kressler... Jim Auxer... I can't remember who else, but there was a bunch of us there. We sat across the table from Booker, McKelvie and some others and started to talk. Terry did the talking. During that time, we noticed those guys [the inmates] getting kind of nervous and looking beyond us. I never took my eyes off them. I watched them the whole time... so did the others. Later on, they agreed to get the inmates to go back into the housing units and so on. Finally, when we did look around, we [saw that we] were surrounded by individuals with shotguns, and there were fire trucks there. It was pretty intimidating.

Then they started to get the guys back in the units.

Most of the evening I was with Jim Auxer.

We were over at the E Gate. The fire had gone out in the E Gate, so it gave us somewhere warm to stand. We were over there with Bob Spirk, I believe, and inmates were bringing buckets of keys and stuff over to E Gate as they were going back in, because that's what we had gotten them to do. Then I remember right after that there were some staff trapped on top of the gym building. At some point a helicopter came in and hovered over and got those guys down. That was...

McNaughton: Gere Kostelac

Kelchner: Yeah, Gere Kostelac and them were up there. I can't remember much of the rest of the evening.

McNaughton: What do you remember, then, about the next night when it started up again?

Kelchner: The next night... during the day we were going through files to determine who would be transferred from the facility.

Later on, we were over delivering meals or something over to around K and J Block. At some point when we were over there, the inmates were out of their cells but still inside the housing units. We were talking to people in K Block and determined we were not going to continue to feed because it was too dangerous.



Don Kelchner working to identify inmates to transfer out of the prison.

We got in the cube truck and drove back across the facility, because the inmates started coming out of the housing units. We were getting chased back across from K Block over to the control center.

Most of us went into the control center. I'm trying to think who from the education building went out the main gate and out that way. Actually, he was the only smart one, but he also was the one that was full of guilt for years about going out and not being with us.

But we ended up going in the control center and got in the control center. Then, shortly thereafter, the inmates broke into Deputy Smith's office and set the office on fire.

Because of the ventilation and the way it was, it sucked all of the smoke into the control center. So, within 30 to 45 seconds, the control center was full of smoke to within about 3 to 4 feet of the floor.

We were trapped in there, and then somebody said, "Let's go out through the key room window." The first person we put out through there was Capt. Bowser. He was a rather large gentleman, but in panic and everything, you can take a lot and stuff it through a cube. We got him out, and then we all got out.

Then we went up to the second floor of the treatment area and we were laying on the floor. Sunday was up there. Kerstetter was up there. They initially had clubs, I think, and then we finally got some weapons up there. They got us out one of the windows and down and out of the institution.

Tim Henry was ... he sucked in a good amount of smoke and got out and got on a litter. He was in pretty bad shape. Most of us got out ok. We went out to the main gate.

I remember being out there and thinking to myself, "I'm not going back in that damn place." Then they said, "We've got to get more people out." So, we all went back in to help get more staff out. That's what we did.

Later on is when Greg White, the chief of security... he was out in the main gate and I believe that's when... and I'm sure both Owens and Freeman were there... and that's when Beck had some words and popped the gate so they could get people in to get people out.

McNaughton: Some people say Owens was there, and some people said Freeman was there. I don't think anyone could confuse the two. Who was there?

Kelchner: I think both were there. I think both were there.

McNaughton: But you think Greg White would know for sure.

Kelchner: Yes. Somebody made a comment about losing the institution. Well, we didn't own any of the institution at that point. The inmates had the majority of it.

Then they started doing negotiations the second night through the fence, and Booker had on some sheets or whatever and was trying to disguise himself, but you could tell by the way he

walked who he was, and they were dealing with him. And that's pretty much what I remember about that night. I don't remember a whole lot. I know we were all busy doing stuff all the time.

On Friday, we continued to try to find inmates to get out of the institution.

It was pretty intense.

I remember going home on Thursday night thinking, "I'm going to leave corrections. I'm done." A couple of days later I heard that Jeff Beard would be coming as the acting superintendent. As soon as I heard he was coming, I knew things would be ok, and I decided to stick with it.

McNaughton: Did you know him to know that?

Kelchner: Yeah, I knew... When I started at Rockview, Jeff was the deputy superintendent for treatment, and I had known him all my years up there. I had complete faith in him, and after we found out he was coming, we learned that John McCullough was coming. He was one of those people you could put your faith in. So, it kind of made it ok. And then we were very fortunate when Ken Kyler showed up. Great group there.

McNaughton: Thank goodness, huh?

Kelchner: Yes.

McNaughton: I talked to John McCullough and he said that Camp Hill... you guys were all great... you had great leaders at Camp Hill... unfortunately you had two deputies there that were bullying you and that it really suppressed you from being able to work to your potential.

Kelchner: As far as I was concerned, we had... they were trying to one-up each other... each wanted to be in charge. They made decisions and didn't think about what others had to offer and just did what they wanted to do. Terry would do stuff Smith didn't want to do; and Smith would do stuff that Terry didn't want to do.

In all honesty, Freeman was a decent guy, but he was a non-participant. He really wasn't involved in the institution and didn't come in a lot. From what I understand, from his secretary, he went home at lunch to watch some show or something. It just wasn't a good thing. Smart guy, but he wasn't made to run the facility, and when you had two deputies that would one-up each other and try to take over and run things, it just went to hell in a handbag.

We knew a year before that something was coming. You could feel it. No matter what you said to them, they just ignored everybody, and that's how it ended up.

I guess Smith got fired. Freeman got fired. Terry, he went into his office and laid on his couch in the fetal position, and the next thing he had PTSD. He kept his job, but in all honesty, I don't think he should have. Not my call.

McNaughton: What a time.

Kelchner: Yeah. It was stressful, and it was stressful for a great deal of time afterwards, but all the guys I worked with... they stuck together and got involved in taking care of stuff. We started to pull things back together with Jeff's leadership.

I know Jim [Auxer] and I, we normally would get into work at 6 or 7 o'clock in the morning, and we'd stay there until about 9 o'clock every night just to be there to provide support for the officers and deal with situations that they may need assistance with... mental health and so on. That's what we did for a couple of months or more.

Then, of course, all of us went in on weekend mornings to cook meals and deliver them. We'd heat them up in kitchen 2, which was a disaster, but the ovens worked. So, we'd heat the meals and help the officers in the units.

There were a lot of people working together to bring the place back. I always felt good about that part. Then later to come back to be superintendent... was quite an honor.

McNaughton: A lot of you guys who were involved in that situation really came out of it as leaders and moved on to higher ranking positions, and you're one of them. I'm so proud of you.

Kelchner: Thanks. But you know, it was just one of those experiences. You couldn't let it take your life over. It happened, and you had to deal with it and move on.

The one thing I learned was there's a lot of guys who are physically strong, and a lot of those guys had some issues dealing with what the inmates had done and stuff. But we found out that it was more important to be mentally tough than physically tough so that you could work through it.

And Jeff did a wonderful job; and John and Kyler... they did a wonderful job in providing leadership. People had to learn about Jeff and how to deal with him and get along with him. I never had any problems with him. He and I always got along real well. Those guys really provided great leadership to get us back in order.

That's a lot of what I remember. I used to be able to tell you more details, but they have kind of slipped away from me.

McNaughton: Well, it's been a long time. Thirty years.

Kelchner: I remember Major Hazen real well... got a long with him great... he was a wonderful man. I saw him a number of times over the years afterwards. It was really good to talk to him.

McNaughton: I tried to reach out to him. He's not interested, and that's ok.

Kelchner: Who was the commissioner – Col. Walp. I remember him too. Then there was a captain...

McNaughton: Regan.

Kelchner: Yeah, they were the top three state police people.

I remember one time on Friday I walked out of the treatment building heading outside for some reason, but I ran into Col. Walp right at the walkway there where the two walkways form from the main gate heading to E Gate.

He looked at me and said, "Where are your leaders." Looking for Freeman and Smith and Henry. I said, "I don't know where they're at, Sir." He said, "Come with me." I said, "I'm just a counselor supervisor." We went down to the main yard. I looked in there and he said, "We've got to get people out of here. What would you do?" I answered him, but told him he can't do it based on what I said. "I'm certainly not in charge. I'm just a lowly counselor supervisor." That was my, pretty much, discussion with Walp.

That's pretty much what I remember.

Initially night two was pretty scary with the inmates coming out of the cells and so on.

Getting them out of there by vehicle was probably on Friday.

You get pretty shook up with you've got about 1,200 guys chasing you.

McNaughton: Well, and it didn't end there. You were trapped, and they tried to smoke you out from control and upstairs in control and you said you were laying on the ground to try to get out of the smoke. That's just crazy.

Kelchner: Yeah, we were up on the second floor of the treatment building laying down just to make sure, because there were some shots fired... not to get shot up on the next floor. That's when... Jim Auxer's office was where it connected to the roof, along group 1, and they had to keep inmates from coming in.

And that's where Sunday and Kerstetter were... They were kind of like the tall and short of it. One of them took the high and one of them took the low.

Then we pulled the air conditioner out of the office window, and Jim Auxer was down below getting some weapons. He was down below, and he wanted a belt to send up weapons. So, they sent down Bower's belt, and he was standing there pitching a bitch about the size of the belt because it wouldn't fit the trigger handle. So, then we ripped out a telephone cord and sent it down to him. They sent some stuff up, and then we started sending stuff out. The fire company had a ladder and that's when... then we had to put Bowser out the window again and down the ladder. That was probably tough on the firemen, and then the rest of us went out that way.

One by one they went down the ladder and then out of the institution.

The smoke came up from below when we took out the air conditioner, and it just came swinging in that window. But we all got out, and nobody died.

McNaughton: Thanks, Don. I appreciate you taking a moment to share this with me.

Kelchner: You're welcome.

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