

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Linda Morrison
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 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 20, 2019, is Linda Morrison Sullivan. Thank you for joining us, Linda.



Linda Morrison

Before we begin, could you please provide us with a brief overview of your DOC career – at which facilities/offices you worked and what titles have you held.

Sullivan: I started in Corrections in 1984. I came over from the Comptroller's Office, and I was hired to be the purchasing agent. In central office, there were no purchasing agents. It was a small fiscal unit. Everybody did a little bit of everything, and I realized that there was a need for someone to do... to oversee purchasing at all of the institutions. So, when I came in, I was a purchasing agent 1 and then, over the years, I worked myself up to a 2 and then a 3, and I became chief of purchasing, and I would go out and hire purchasing agents and interview business managers and be on the hiring team for the new institutions, as well as if someone left, and they needed someone to do training out in the field.

In 1989, I was at Central Office during the riot. That was probably one of the highlights of my career, and at the time... that week I was moving into a new house and I was on vacation. So, on Wednesday night, the 25th, I saw it on the news, and, of course, we were devastated.

Then Thursday morning I got a call to come in to work because my other responsibility in corrections was the surplus property officer. I ran the surplus property program and interacted with other agencies like State Police, Department of Health and so on... Transportation and so

on. We were always... we didn't have a big budget. I was always out there scrounging for the department, and there was an old barn across the street from headquarters at Camp Hill, the administration building... that we took over. It was an empty barn, and we just basically started transferring property in there – desks and cabinets -- and whenever somebody needed something, they called me or Dave Garlinger. The two of us were the chief scrounges at the time. I worked closely with the Department of General Services, and we got vehicles, hospital beds... whatever an institution or a community corrections center needed. They would get in touch with us, and I would go perusing through the departments and call my contacts.

Anyhow, so when I was called in... the reason I was called in Thursday morning was because the inmates had set fire to the institution and the main dining room was still smoldering. They had files in those cabinets, and so on... the phones, whatever we could replace for them temporarily until they got everything cooled down. You couldn't even touch the file cabinets, they were still hot. So, Dave and I went inside the institution on the back of a pick-up truck...

McNaughton: Which date was this?

Sullivan: This was Thursday (October 26).

McNaughton: Thursday afternoon...

Sullivan: Thursday afternoon, or it might have been late morning. The institution was supposedly locked down. So, I got called and I went in as soon as I could... and I'm pretty sure it was like maybe after lunch sometime, but anyhow... we got clearance and Dave and I went in and ... we took a pick-up truck – one of the institution staff drove the pick-up truck -- and we sat on the back and we went in, and it was very eerie, quiet and very, kind of, unusual.

We went into the dining hall and assessed the damage, and they said, "This, this and this." The phone wires were melted... everything. Dave was the communications officer too. The two of us were like... we had our hands in a little bit of everything. We went, did the assessment and then we went back out to the barn to see what we could come up with that they needed immediately; and of course, we did, and we scrounged up as much as we could.

Then after that, that was pretty much all I could do. So, I went back home. Of course, that night I saw it on the news, and oh, my God, I couldn't believe that I was in there that day and it wasn't locked down.

Well, then Friday morning... I believe it was Friday, I got called because they needed locks. They needed handcuffs. They needed everything.

So, I went in to work and I started going down the list... everybody was calling me from inside and the commissioner's office, saying, "We need this, we need that."

First and foremost, it was, "We need 1,500 locks." The cell blocks were open. The wiring mechanisms weren't opening and so on... they needed handcuffs, they needed chains and shackles and so on.

[At this same time] the Camp Hill institution purchasing office was also working diligently to locate things for them, but from a different standpoint. I was taking my orders from the commissioner's office. They couldn't find 1,500 locks. You can't just go here and by 20 and 20 here and so on. So, ironically, I located, in Florida, an outfit that had 1,500 locks in a warehouse. I contacted the commissioner and we got in touch with the Lt. Governor's Office at that time. The Lt. Governor sent a National Guard plane down to Florida to get the locks and bring everything that we get our hands on that night back.... I'm just trying to think of what else... they were using those ties straps... anything they could.

One of the other things that we found that they could use at the barn on Thursday was paper blankets. It was comical because I used to go scrounging out at the gap [Fort Indiantown Gap]... and the feds would give me whatever they had in their barracks... they'd have old beds and mattresses and things like that if it was usable... medical equipment. We took everything because the institutions did not have enough money to buy the equipment and supplies that they needed. Budgets were always so tight. Corrections was low on the totem pole back then.

I brought back a truckload of paper blankets. They were real heavy duty... almost like cardboard, and when I brought them back, everybody in my office laughed at me when I told them what we had. I said, "Well, you know we could use these sometime during an emergency. You never know." So anyhow, sure enough they used them in the rec yard that Thursday night when they rounded up the inmates and had them in the yard. They had to sleep on those paper blankets.



Inmates sleeping in the prison yard under the paper blankets.

That was kind of... I came back in then, of course my vacation was canceled, and then I started contracting... calling bus companies to bring in buses to transport the inmates up to Waymart.

McNaughton: Because, I believe from the articles that I read, they were starting to ship the inmates out that Saturday.

Sullivan: Yes.

McNaughton: So, one day you're working on locks and the next day...

Sullivan: Yes. I mean if they needed food for the... like for the institution -- I believe the purchasing office there was buying food locally for our staff that were outside the fence... feeding the emergency personnel, state troopers and so on. They [Camp Hill's purchasing office] were busy helping doing those things, so I had to supplement help for them. So, and then on a larger scale, like I said, I wrote contract after contract for buses to move the inmates; and then because Waymart at the time was a state hospital... a closed state hospital... the transition wasn't completed, and they needed items for there. We didn't have a purchasing agent on staff [at Waymart yet], so [SCIs] Dallas and Retreat... everybody had to pitch in in that Northeast region to help get Waymart off the ground also. So, I had to hire staff for up there in the business office. I had to get them set up...

Back to the riot... that was just such a blur... we were just so busy round-the-clock. We lived... we didn't even have a chance to look out the window. It was just sheer chaos anyhow. I remember... the halls were like maddening... staff running from office to office [saying], "We need this. Can we get that." It was really crazy.

Then after I became chief of purchasing... I expanded the surplus program and the purchasing program and developed policies and procedures which were never in place before, obviously. I started going to the different institutions to build the business offices up. In 2000, I was promoted to Correctional Industries... director of Correctional Industries, which was *the* most interesting job I ever had. The position was vacant for a year and a half... now I knew why after I got in there. It was maddening, but it was just an amazing challenge, and I loved working with all of the institutions and the shops at every institution to improve their sales and marketing and their production. We did a lot of good things for Correctional Industries to expand the program and increase inmate employment, which was the primary goal.

McNaughton: Great career. Back to the riot. Some people I talked to... they actually helped make sandwiches. You were just too busy. You were actually working the phones.

Sullivan: I never stepped out. When I walked into the building [Central Office]... that was it. I never left my office. We packed drinks and everything we just... I think it one point I went downstairs to the dining room. They were packing sandwiches, and people said, "Do you want one?" [I said,] OK, and then you'd run back up to your office. So many... so many Central Office staff were just running around doing whatever they could for anybody.

McNaughton: Are there any other things that you recall or stories that you heard about the riot that you think are interesting?

Sullivan: One of the things that I'll never forget was that, after I got in there, some of the staff were trying to find out what happened; did anybody have a clue it was coming? So, back then, I believe Bob Troutman was the food service supervisor who did the training of inmates...

McNaughton: In Central Office?

Sullivan: ... in Central Office. I remember him saying that inmates did not want to go back inside.

McNaughton: His inmates?

Sullivan: His inmates. And Mr. Hall's inmates. Some of his, because Mr. Hall was the maintenance supervisor. The inmates told Troutman, "Something's going down. We don't want to go back in." And I believe, knowing Troutman, that he passed that on, but I don't know to what degree or to who... or that anything could have been done at that point.

McNaughton: How far in advance do you think that was?

Sullivan: Oh, that was the day of the riot. That was the first day of the riot, because that was the whole problem, they didn't want to go back in. They knew something was gonna happen.

McNaughton: If I recall correctly, the time that they would go back in was around 3 p.m.

Sullivan: Yes. And they didn't want to go back, and that was about the time that... again, I was on vacation. Remember our offices... you were above me... and our offices were right there in front of that tower in front of the rec yard where it kicked off. But that was one of the major things that was a big topic of discussion. Not that, again, that it could have stopped anything, but that was the first indication that something was coming, and they just couldn't put their finger on it... the staff. The inmates may have known more but they didn't say anything for fear because they knew they had to go back in. So, they couldn't say too much except that something's going down... I remember that phrase. I'd heard it too many times from the staff in there, you know.

McNaughton: There were a lot of signs. There were inmates who were telling other people, and...

Sullivan: Even the food service staff inside... afterwards in years to come, when we would have manager meetings -- I always attended meetings because there are always issues with buying and contracts and how they needed this or they couldn't get that. Marcia Noles always invited me to talk to the managers and see what we could do to improve a situation. I remember that was always a topic of discussion with Camp Hill. That they... they brought that up all of the time... there so much scuttlebutt going around... in the dining room... the inmates that worked in the morning in the dining room, the guys that were on maintenance. Even over into the staff dining room, because I believe that they heard it all the way around... the buzz. There were a lot of inmates that didn't want to be involved in it and feared for themselves. So, that was one of the things that I heard, and I think everybody heard that.

Then of course, later on, we heard horror stories about what the staff that were in there had to endure.

One of my own staff was a secretary. She was a clerk inside the dining room and she was stuck in an elevator... they hid from inmates. They [the inmates] were setting fire to everything, and they locked themselves... I mean, there were corrections officers... I can't even... We were so... I remember us crying because we heard stories about the officers and people that we knew being hurt.

I still gives me goose bumps right now just thinking about the stories that we heard... so-and-so was involved in this or that and ... and then we had some officers that actually came out for debriefing, and they would tell us... oh, it was just the most horrible situation. I just can't believe that they had to live through that. It was really horrible. I mean, our role was nothing compared to what they had to deal with. Any little, tiny, tiny bit of help that we could provide... wow... locks... that's great if that kept them locked up so that they couldn't happen again the next day... Great. I feel wonderful, but other than that it was like... everybody worked so hard together.

That's what we loved so much about working at the Department of Corrections, especially in headquarters. We had a wonderful comradery. Everybody helped everybody because we were small, and we needed so much. Our budget was so skimpy, so everybody was always trying to pitch in... whether it was, "Hey, I'm going to Waymart, do you want to ride along." We always tried to cut down on travel costs and things like that... just simple things.

McNaughton: And then the closeness really seemed to get even stronger after an emergency.

Sullivan: Absolutely. Going to the training academy down there... for different training programs and that... everybody had so many stories, and it was like... oh, everybody was hugging other people [saying], "So glad see you, that you're OK," or you know, "Hey, so-and-so was working in the institution and or was stuck in there whatever ... you know, and it was... it was just it was an amazing career for me because, like I said, I was fortunate enough to be in the Department of Corrections when it was small. I was fortunate enough to be able to get promotions because I worked hard, tirelessly, as we all did. I don't think I can think of one person who didn't work hard, it's ironic.

But, yeah, we were a wonderful family. Even once a year when we did our annual Christmas party, it was just so... it was... it was just so fun, and everybody just looked forward to just taking a breather.

It was great.

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