

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Mike Leidy
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 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, October 2, 2019, is Mike Leidy. Thanks for joining us, Mike.

Leidy: You're welcome.

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

Leidy: Sure. I worked at Lancaster County Prison from 1972 to 1978, before I took a job at SCI Camp Hill as a [corrections officer] trainee. I started at Camp Hill as a corrections officer trainee in August 1978; and about 1983, I took the job as training coordinator at the prison, which means I was responsible for in-service, pre-service and out-service training. A lot of my job was orientation of new employees, and that's what was going on the day of the riot.

McNaughton: Then where did you finally end your career?

Leidy: I left Camp Hill to go to the DOC's Training Academy in Elizabethtown in 1991 or 1992, and did a couple different things there – was management training and was in curriculum development, putting together all of the training for the state at the time. In 2002, I took a job at SCI Laurel Highlands, in Somerset, as a unit manager, and I retired from there in 2009.

McNaughton: Long career. Congratulations on that. Let's get to the riot... It's around 2:30/3 p.m. on Wednesday, October 25, 1989... where are you and what's happening?



Mike Leidy

Leidy: My office was inside the compound above the gymnasium, between E Gate and the main yard gate. The training sergeants, at the time, were also... had their offices there. Sgt. Dan Fry had to come in to get his paperwork together, and I heard a call on his radio about a fight at E Gate. So, I walked down to the bottom of the steps to see what I could see, I was being nosy. At that point I didn't see anything, so I went back upstairs.

I forgot to mention... I had three new trainees with me that day. They had started that Monday at 8 o'clock, and this is their third day in a prison.

Anyhow... back upstairs. Nothing out of the ordinary. Sgt. Fry went on about his way, and about five minutes later, I heard the screeching of tires and a banging. I looked out and there was a jeep or... I forget what type of vehicle it was from maintenance... banging into the doors of the commissary, which was right across the street [inside the prison] I could see from my window.

At this point, I realized there was something bad going on... obviously. I told the trainees, "Stay off the windows and turn out the lights. We're not going to let anybody know we're up here." So, in the meantime, I heard this continued screeching and the inmate ran the jeep through the gate in the field and all away across the field and tried to break through the outer fence. He couldn't break through the inner fence, and he got hung up there and ran back into the prison.

So, I looked outside my side window toward the modular units, and I could see them dragging an officer out in handcuffs. I said [to the trainees], "Hey, this is bad. Just chill out. Don't let anyone know we're up here." So, we just kind of sat there. In the meantime, every so often I would take a peek out... let me back up a little bit, I called control to let them know that we were up there and if anything... if inmates started to break in, we were going out the back steps and go hide underneath the boxing ring from the old boxing program... [which was at the base of the steps].

On and off through the last couple hours of the riot, all you could see was just see bedlam... people just running around. In the meantime, I was basically trying to calm these officers. They didn't know what was going on. Of course, at that point, I didn't either for sure.

Cut to the chase, maybe... I'll tell you a funny story...

At 4 o'clock that afternoon, which is quitting time for the new guys, one of them came up to me and said, "Mr. Leidy, I have a question." I thought the guy was going to ask me, "Am I going to die." I said, "What do you need, what's up?" He said, "Are they going to pay me overtime if I say after 4 o'clock?" True story. I told him they would and not to worry about it.

Anyhow... maybe 6:30/7 o'clock that evening, I had seen Capt. John Kerry come down onto the main yard and was directing inmate traffic. So, I thought things must be getting a little bit better. So, I looked out the side window and I saw an officer and a state trooper walking down the road outside my door. So, I hollered at the officer, who was Harry Himes..., "Harry, Can I come out now? Is everything cool? Is it safe?" The state cop said, "Who's he?" Harry said, "I don't know, you better shoot him." Honest to God.

Anyhow... we get out of there and went over to Group 1 where the captain's office was, and Major Stover met me at the entrance to control and said, "Do me a favor. I heard there's some people trapped in the plumbing shop [which is in K Block]. Will you go down and check it out?" Sure, what am I supposed to do, say no? I took these three trainees with me... they don't know what's going on, and went down into the basement of the plumbing shop and sure enough there were three maintenance guys down there ... who had gotten out through the boiler plant through the tunnels and got to the plumbing shop. So, I got them out and just... throughout the night I don't remember exactly what I did, but I kind of hung around the captain's office and saw all this stuff happening... bringing hostages out and all those good things.

McNaughton: Can I just interrupt you here? I had a couple questions. The first question was... when you called control and said, "We'll try to go out the back door," what did they say to you?

Leidy: "OK." Nothing. I'm not sure anybody knew, because I got a call a couple of days later when someone said, "Where were you hiding?"

McNaughton: I'm sure they were getting inundated with phone calls from all over the prison.

Leidy: I know.

McNaughton: The other thing was... so, you were upstairs... where were you in relation to the music room where Gere Kostelac was?

Leidy: Opposite end of the gym. The kitchen was in the middle. If you're facing the kitchen, the music room was on the left, and the training area was on the right. It used to be the old training academy before they moved to Utley Drive.

McNaughton: Wow. Then, did you know that Gere was stuck?

Leidy: No, I had no idea what was going on around me. I remember also telling the kitchen tower I was up there, because you could see the kitchen tower from my window. I tried to let as many people know where I was or was going to be as I possibly could.

Back to getting out... I was in the captain's office... I just hung around all night to see what I could do... help answer phones, whatever I could do in that particular area. There was a... inmates were barricaded primarily behind E Gate at the time, so there wasn't anything I could do... there were like a hundred people over there, so I just stuck around to see what I could do. I remember distinctly, one of the hostages was released coming into the captain's office and said, "Hey, Mike, have you seen my wedding ring?" I just felt sorry for the guy... in the middle of all this stuff looking for his wedding ring.

Back to that... about sometime in the afternoon there was a call for all administrative staff to report up to the commissioner's office for a phone call... conference call from the governor. I don't know if you heard about the conference call yet or not. So, I went up there to listen to what he had to say... he congratulated us for a job well done and all that stuff. At this point I had no idea how bad the cells were. I hadn't been over there yet. I heard there was a lot of contraband and stuff laying out on the walks, but I hadn't been over to the cell blocks. There was no need... there were plenty of officers over there and I didn't want to get in the way.

I went up there and heard this thing... [the conference call], and then I talked to a couple of guys and heard that the locks were broken, and it wasn't secure, but they were getting chains and padlocks and stuff to put on the doors... is what I was told. Basically, I went home.

I don't know what time I got home, but sometime early in the evening [of October 26], I was sleeping, and my sister-in-law called and said, "Turn the TV on. Camp Hill is burning down." I thought it was reruns from the first night. Then I realized it was live.

So, I got in the car and did 80 mph up 283, state cops passed me like I'm standing still.

I got to the prison, and ran across Dale Hartman who was running the armory at the time, and he said, "Mike, I'm out of guns." So, I said to a trainee who had only been there a couple of months, "Give me your gun." I took the gun off the trainee basically did what I could. We went inside the prison, and the first five yards of the prison, maybe 10 yards, was friendly territory, but the rest of the prison was inhabited by inmates running around rampant. There were several officers there with shotguns... with inmates flex cuffed right in front of the main gate. Again, there wasn't much I could do inside at this point.

So, I went back out and went back into the armory and spent most of the night in the armory with Dale Hartman handing out weapons that we could find.

McNaughton: That was the night that all of the Camp Hill staffers were stuck above control.

Leidy: Right. They had just gotten out. I remember... Sammy Smith had just gotten out and had a blanket over his shoulders, and a couple of guys sitting there with their heads down... shoulders covered with blankets. I said, "What the hell happened?" and that's when I found out they had just gotten out of control five minutes before I got there.

I do remember going inside for a little bit more. It's all kind of a blur. I was over in the Group 1 and 2 yard, when inmates were breaking out of the flex cuffs, and a lieutenant came to me and said, "Mike, get me some state cuffs." I wound up over back in Group 2 and 3 at a secure fence... still inside the prison, but it was a perimeter fence they had breached... it was still barricaded... watching things burn and all this other stuff happen. The reason I'm telling you this story is... I remember Joe [Miller] sitting down crying. I didn't cry, but a good friend of mine and a respected sergeant ... also turned to me and started bawling his eyes out. I remember hugging this guy at the gate inside the prison. I said, "It's going to be ok." That kind of broke me down too, but I never really lost it.

So, geez. I thought I'd remember a lot more than I do... a lot more details... it's been so long.

McNaughton: Tell me about what it looked like in there. People have compared it to a war zone...

Leidy: Exactly. What I often say to people is, "Every corrections employee from Camp Hill corrections was a Vietnam experience." It was like a war zone... screaming and hollering. Chainsaws running... inmates beating people and just God awful.

McNaughton: Do you remember how that night ended... or, I guess it ended in the early morning?

Leidy: I remember the... I wasn't inside the prison. I was back outside. I think I had to do stuff back with Dale [Hartman]. I know we handed out more shotguns for the perimeter from Dallas prison, and they weren't the regular ones from the armory and we had to show people who to operate these shotguns. So, we did that.

Shortly after we did that, we got word that state police had stormed the prison and started taking the place back and were calling for ambulances. I remember the same guy that I was talking about that was crying... I think we were outside the main gate at this point because the ambulances were coming out... he said, "Mike, I just got word that my good friend, Harold Mauer. Mike, I'm going to get Harold. I don't care how bad I feel." Now this sergeant, his face was all caved in from a pipe... he was black and blue and eyes swollen... he jumped up on the back of an ambulance to go and help his friend out. It's something I wish I would have had a camera for... to take pictures.

McNaughton: Was that sergeant a hostage that his face was beat in or...?

Leidy: No, he was part of taking back over the prison the first night.

McNaughton: Oh, ok.

Leidy: There were some guys who were beaten and managed to get away, or they were held hostage... at this point, I don't know who was held hostage or who wasn't. I recognized a couple of guys they were letting out... I remember officers came over and threw a guy on the ground in front of control center... handcuffed behind his back... dressed in browns... and I recognized he was an officer. I was clutching an apple and for some reason that mental image always sticks in my mind... and them dumping this guy on the ground and I'm holding an apple for dear life.

The state police take the place back and somewhere around... back up a little bit... around 3 or 4 in the morning... I happened to be in the administration building doing something... and the switchboard operator said, "I thought you went home. Your wife just called." Her father died in the middle of this whole thing. Obviously, I couldn't get home.

So, 11 or 12 on Friday morning... I had to stop and think, because I was in a carpool. Who drove, where's the guy I rode with? So, we finally connected and went home. I went to my father-in-law's funeral on Saturday and then came back in on Sunday and worked when I could... 12 hours a day like everybody else just cleaning up stuff, getting cells ready...

The scariest part was being trapped up in the office, and if I had not had three trainees, I think Gere had a couple of inmates with him... which would probably be even scarier... I was able to kind of mother hen these three trainees, so it was like, I didn't want to let them know I was scared to hell... to death. I think that kind of helped me not to be scared too badly. Although I was always worried the inmates would come up through there and drag us out. Now, during the chaos on Thursday night, they did burn down the whole training area... my office... desks and everything else. I lost everything I had in the office... the training room.

McNaughton: Talk to me about debriefing. What was debriefing like?

Leidy: It was not until about two weeks later when my boss, Jan Smith at the time, said, “Mike, Major Stover called me. He’s worried about you. He wants you to go to debriefing.” Ok, when and where. So, it was two Camp Hill employees... psychology staff... and we ended up debriefing them as much as they debriefed us. We had to tell them what we saw... what happened. Of course, they would tell us more about them than what we ... it was really more of a storytelling session. I remember it didn’t last long... maybe 15 minutes.

I just really respect the people who were beaten and held hostage. Particularly... each person is different, but I really respect the people who were able to come back to work within days... like nothing happened to them... do you understand what I’m saying?

McNaughton: Right, because there were a lot of people like that... a good amount.

Leidy: Yes, more people... good people who just wanted to help the brothers and sisters in the jail.

McNaughton: Yeah, and what I find that is consistent in all the interviews is that the second night... everybody was watching TV or was told, “Hey, Turn on your TV.” And they are like, “Oh, no, that was last night.” The reaction was all the same. And then they realized, “Oh, no this is really happening,” and the first reaction after that was, “I have to go.” And everybody felt this need to respond, and they did.

Leidy: Yeah. No one called anybody. There was too much confusion to call anybody in. It was just like an automatic response. Everybody was somewhere else and heard one way, shape or form... I read a couple stories of how people heard of it, and a lot of them are saying the same thing I am... they heard it on the news, the TV or someone called them... and they just went without being called.

McNaughton: My husband and I were driving in our car, and we were over near the Capital City Mall and I smelled this smoke and I thought, “Oh, I hope that’s not the prison.” For some reason that was my thought, and I turned on the radio and sure enough they were reporting that it was happening again. So, my husband... I said, “Take me to work.” We were all in the same area, all doing pretty much the same thing, and we all converged back on the prison.

Leidy: Amazing. Instinct. It was a helpless feeling not being able to do anything. I remember that more than anything. I had to do something.

McNaughton: Yeah, and then the great relief when the state police took it over, it was just a big sigh of relief that you knew things were going to be better... not necessarily normal...

Leidy: Better, yeah.

McNaughton: ...but better. It greatly changed the department.

Leidy: The department has not been normal for ... since I’ve worked for it.

McNaughton: Right. Yeah. Is there anything else that you want to share?

Leidy: No. I hope it was of some assistance. My thoughts are rambling.

McNaughton: No. Yeah, it's great. I get little tid-bits of the picture from... it's like putting a huge puzzle together, and everybody has a different piece of the puzzle. Very interesting. I appreciate you taking time to participate in this project.

Leidy: Thank you.

McNaughton: Thank you, Mike. Take care.

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