

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: W. Scott Thornsley
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 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 3, 2019, is William Scott Thornsley. Thanks for joining us, Scott.

Thornsley: You're welcome. Thank you.

McNaughton: As we begin, could you just provide our listeners with a brief overview of your DOC career?

Thornsley: I was hired in October 1976 in the Planning & Research Department, and I stayed there until 1983, when I was named the legislative liaison. I remained a legislative liaison from 1983 until my departure in August 1995.

McNaughton: Thank you. Let's get to the Camp Hill Riot. It's 2:30/3 p.m. on Wednesday, October 25, 1989. Where are you and what's happening?

Thornsley: I remember it as if it occurred yesterday. I was in the Press Office with Ken Robinson and Sue McNaughton, and Ken Robinson yelled out, "Hey! Look out the back window!" We were able to see a group of inmates... hundreds and hundreds of inmates... on both sides of a large fence... trying to get in... or go through the fence. It was just a mess. There was only one correctional officer there, and within a couple of minutes, you could literally see inmates attack an officer. I was right there. I saw all but 30 seconds of the beginning of the riot. It was unbelievable.

McNaughton: If I recall correctly... I was down the hall, and I was watching at the same time out the window, and the officer ran to the inner fence. Do you remember that?

Thornsley: I do. He ran inside where the cell blocks were, and once he got into one of the cell blocks, within seconds, all of the inmates started to pour out into the central yard, but that was after he was severely beaten.

McNaughton: And he laid there for a very long time.

Thornsley: Yes.

McNaughton: Tell me what happened next.

Thornsley: Pandemonium happened. Officers started to run outside of their cell blocks, and run outside through the fence. They were literally running away from the riot. They had no other choice but to escape, because hundreds and hundreds of inmates were just running in and out... it was already, within the first couple of minutes, unmanageable. So, they were escaping.

McNaughton: Yeah, and did you go up on the roof?

Thornsley: I was on the roof. Within the first five minutes, I asked Ken if he had a video camera. He said, "No," and he said, "Take it." And the reason I thought of that was, I was just beginning to explore possible doctoral dissertations, and one of the recommendations at one of the leading riots of that decade in the 1980s, was somebody should be present who has no other duties than to just take a picture of the riot. And that's what I did. I went up [on the roof] and laid down and took hour after hour after hour of videotape. I videotaped the riot.

McNaughton: Right. And then, eventually, you were relieved by Commonwealth Media Services. I think.

Thornsley: No. The first day I was... I stayed there until the very end.

McNaughton: OK

Thornsley: The second day, in the morning, when the state police were going to blow through the gate where the initial riot happened, I was up on the other part. I was on the roof of the third floor with state police, and I was videotaping. All of a sudden, from the rear of the institution, people started shooting guns. For some unknown reason, they hit the top of the brick roof, and I was leaning over and a bullet came within a couple feet of me. I turned to the state policeman and I said, "You want this? You can have it," because they [bullets] were just plinking all around us. It was just poor shots on somebody's part.

McNaughton: Right. We fast forwarded a little bit. That was the second night.

Thornsley: Yeah, that was the second night.

McNaughton: You were there for the whole first night, up on the roof. There was a lot of negotiating and stuff going on, and at some point, the administration/negotiators must have said, "Ok, inmates, go back in your cells. You'll get to meet with the superintendent the next day." Then things just settled down. Tell me how that night ended for you.

Thornsley: I went home. I only lived about two minutes away. There was just nothing else to do for me. I think they had discharged everybody that wasn't essential, and I certainly wasn't essential. It was too dark to continue videotaping. So, it ended very normally, but I was newly married, and I came home and told my wife. After that I began to become scared of what could have happened that day.

McNaughton: Then the next day... you just went to work normal time?

Thornsley: No. I went early. Ken Robinson called me, and he said, “Can you come over right away?” For what reason, I have no idea why, but it was very early. It was hours before the normal time, and I was there in time to see the inmates charge the front gate, and that is when I was scared to death. It was a large group of inmates... a couple hundred of them... charging the front gate. I saw the officer above the little walkway fire a couple of rounds into the air. Then the inmates dispersed, but I mean they were... I was scared, because the next thing that they would want to do is maybe, I thought, go to the central administrative office, but... I was there hours before anybody else, and Ken Robinson was there, and we were like, “Oh, my God, they’re storming the gate. I hope the officer does something.”

McNaughton: So, this is the second night.

Thornsley: This is in the morning.

McNaughton: Ok, let me... I’m just a little confused. So, Wednesday, from 3 until like 11... then you go home. The next day... it doesn’t start again until 6 p.m.

Thornsley: Yes, I was there, and it was just a normal day.

McNaughton: So, Thursday [October 26], just a normal day. When did this storming go on?

Thornsley: That was the next morning... That was when they took over. The second day... all the action took place really the first day... to the best of my memory. It was the third day... the Thursday morning, when the state police came in with their water cannons, and that’s when I saw the inmates charge the building.

McNaughton: Ok.

Thornsley: I’m sorry if I’m getting confused.

McNaughton: That’s ok. Everybody’s a little fuzzy. You’re up on the roof that first day. Tell me what you were seeing.

Thornsley: Well, most of the time I was videotaping the exercise yard, where one officer had barricaded himself in with about a dozen or so inmates who were lifting weights. The inmates had gone to the edge of the fence and were pleading to get out. They didn’t want anything to do with the riots. I could hear them saying, “Can’t you get us over? Can’t you get us out?” The officer was there, and then all of a sudden, a couple inmates got into the area where the officer had shut the door, and they beat him up. They beat him terribly. So, for hours... and I can remember this because I was looking at my watch and saying, “Well, now this is ... whatever time... and the officer has not moved. The officer has not moved. I don’t know if he’s dead.” Several of the inmates were pleading, “Throw us over a stretcher. We want to take him out. We don’t want him to die.” Then hours and hours later, somebody brought in a stretcher and, despite the fact that they were warned not to get close to that officer by the officer in the tower who had a gun on them, they very gently put him in the stretcher and took him out. But it seemed like I videotaped that officer and saying, “He hasn’t moved.” I don’t recall him moving at all for hours. I thought he was dead. He didn’t twitch a finger.

I also saw inmates get in trucks and try to ram the back of the fence unsuccessfully.

I saw inmates throw what had to be Molotov cocktails on the brick buildings. I never knew that brick could burn. Buildings were on fire.

I just saw inmates running to and from the areas.

I saw the start of the fire at the Correctional Industries building.

Just mass confusion, but I do remember, vividly, inmates getting into a truck and trying to ram a gate or a fence in the rear, and almost having a wreck at one instance.

McNaughton: Amazing. And all the while, helicopters are flying overhead.

Thornsley: Yes. Helicopters were flying. I was taking pictures of them. I was the only one that was taking pictures. There was nobody else until the final morning of the incident. Commonwealth Media... I didn't know had anything to do with it, unless they were there with the state police. All I know is I gave my video camera to a state police officer who was up on the roof, because I just didn't want any part of that. I was too scared.

McNaughton: I was wondering what happened to that tape?

Thornsley: I gave it to Ken. I gave it to Ken. What disappoints me is that, through the course of the Senate and House Judiciary Committee hearings, everybody was alluding to the presence of some unknown person taking a video camera... videotaping it [the riot]. I asked Commissioner Owens, "Why don't you just let me acknowledge that I was the unknown person videotaping?" And he said, "No. I don't want you to volunteer any information at all." I said, "This could solve so many problems." Lawmakers and the two investigative committees went over for hours and hours how it started and what did you see... and no one who was interviewed... no one before those two committees could tell the Senate and House Committees what happened. All they said was, "A riot started." Where Ken and I actually saw it... and you... from the very beginning, but I wasn't allowed to say anything. Not one thing about that.

McNaughton: That's just unbelievable.

Thornsley: Can I just ad-lib on?

McNaughton: Yes.

Thornsley: What also was a huge issue was... there was a question about... we heard there was a riot planned earlier in September around the state track meet. I was like, "Why doesn't anybody ask me?" The issue was... the year before, I served as a PIAA track and field official at the track meet along with another man from my chapter. It was the week before the track meet in September, and Keith Smith, who was serving a life sentence at Camp Hill and who was working in the [central office] dining room... I was going through the breezeway, and he literally pulled me into the men's room. I thought, "That's kind of weird." He said, "Mr. Scott, I need to speak to you privately. You can't tell anybody." I said, "That's not going to happen." He said, "You can't go to the track meet this weekend." I said, "Why not?" He said, "They're planning a riot. There's a faction of inmates that are planning a riot. They heard that there's two civilians going

to be track officials here. They're going to take you hostage, and you can't go in because there's going to be a riot." So, I told Keith, "I'm going to have to let the commissioner know."

I wrote up a very detailed memorandum to Commissioner Owens. He was not happy that he got that. He said, "You should have come up and told me in person and told me verbally. Not in writing." It was almost like I was being reprimanded, but it was a very detailed, one-page memorandum of which I think I still have somewhere. Shortly... like the next day or two, they cancelled the state track meet, but no one ever asked me.

No one ever asked... and when I say no one, I mean no one in the General Assembly, ever asked, "What do you know?" And yet I was the author of that memorandum. I was doing the videotaping. Very, very disappointing that no one asked me what happened.

McNaughton: So, even after you sent the memo... but before the track meet was cancelled... were you planning on going?

Thornsley: Oh, absolutely not!

McNaughton: Good.

Thornsley: I called my friend that night, and I was not going to go. The threat was so real from Keith, that he was worried for me. He was worried for me, because I had represented him before the Board of Pardons on one, if not two, occasions. Right away I said, "There's no way I'm going." I made that decision up right away.

McNaughton: How did he know... well, he must have seen you inside then?

Thornsley: He saw me inside the next year, plus it was... everybody knew that I was a track and field official at the central office. Everybody knew.

McNaughton: And you had conversations with the inmates in the kitchen. It wasn't uncommon...

Thornsley: In fact, I think a couple of inmates said, "Are you going to be officiating the track meet?" And I said, "Sure, I am." I can remember... I loved that track meet because they paid me \$100 to officiate, and it was only like two hours long. That was like really big money in 1989 for a two-hour officiating assignment.

McNaughton: Just the thought that you could have gone through with that and been a hostage. Thank goodness he warned you.

Thornsley: Yeah.

McNaughton: Wow. There were signs that something was brewing. There were staff morale issues and all kinds of things. They changed policies. Can you talk a little bit about some of the things that were happening that were making the inmates unhappy?

Thornsley: I can. There was a change in the policy of Family Visitation Day. That was discussed formally and informally. I just... by keeping your ears open, I learned about that. There was rumors about, "We're getting so overcrowded." That was another issue. Another issue

was that inmates were not happy with R.C. Smith, the deputy superintendent for operations. They just didn't like him. It's not that he did anything wrong, they just didn't like him. So, those three issues... it was just boiling.

McNaughton: Well, how did you learn about that issue... was it through legislators?

Thornsley: No. just talking in the cafeteria [central office dining room]. Eating lunch with the guys. Just normal things.

McNaughton: And I interrupted you. I'm sorry.

Thornsley: It was gossip. Pretty reliable gossip that Camp Hill is boiling. I know that Superintendent Freeman had sent a memo to the commissioner about tensions in the institution, and I know that... because I was at a meeting where Commissioner Owens said, "Don't send me any memos. Call me." For those who remember, Commissioner Owens didn't like to get things in writing. He liked to hear things personally, and I never trusted that decision of his. So, I always disobeyed him and put things in writing. But I had always told the Governor's Office about my concern, and was a little more explicit in my concerns, which I won't go into here... but they said, "Keep putting things in writing and letting us know, even though we're not in the Department of Corrections." And I did. It was just... common knowledge, and I'd happen to hear things at meetings... at staff meetings.

McNaughton: You just could tell that stuff was brewing. There were some situations at other institutions as well. Earlier in the year there was a pretty significant situation at Rockview, and I talked to John McCullough about that, and that's going to be part of the project. Then also, just a couple days before Camp Hill, there was a Huntingdon incident, where they lost a complete housing unit... a whole tier, but they took that back successfully... but with force. So, there were things happening throughout the system... and then you have Camp Hill.

What else do you remember?

Thornsley: Before the riot, the Department of Correctios was the least visible state agency in Harrisburg. Overnight it jumped to the most-visible state agency.

I was probably the least visible legislative liaison before the riot, and within two days, I was the most-visible legislative liaison. It changed my professional career, because all of a sudden, I had real work. I had handled hundreds and hundreds of constituent inquiries. Of course, there were the legislative hearings.

I was really... my biggest disappointment was that... literally the next day... the Senate Judiciary Committee called in the staff members from the Camp Hill institution. The next day. After everything was over... when they were dealing with how to rebuild an institution and where to put the inmates... they took them all away for... this is deputy superintendents, the superintendent... they were taking them away for almost a full day! It was day after day, and then they had Commissioner Owens in, and it was like... I can't understand how he had the composure to say, "Can't you give my department a week or so or a month or so to regroup and

figure out what we're doing, instead of making us prepare statements and calling us in here for hours on end?"

I was terribly disappointed at the political intrigue that occurred, because everybody was after the Department of Corrections, because they wanted to blame it on the governor somehow. I remember going into the individual I reported to in the Governor's Office and having a nice conversation with him and saying, "This is not a failure of the prison staff. This is not a failure of the commissioner of corrections. This is a failure of one incident started unfortunately and it just kept growing and growing."

I remember the night... I think this was the first night of the riot, and the inmate dining room workers [in central office]... were still there, of course they weren't allowed to go back to the prison.

I remember going up to [inmate] Keith Smith, and he was in tears at the back of the dining room looking out into the fires. I said, "What are you crying for?" I just didn't think. He said, "They're burning my home."

For some reason I forgot about that for years and years. It wasn't until 2001 that one day it just popped into my head again, and I immediately wrote a detailed memorandum and sent it to the Board of Pardons, because he was coming up for the Board of Pardons again. The last time I had represented him, I had heard that there were concerns that he was a major ringleader the first day.

I can remember going to Camp Hill with Keith and the whole board was there, and they asked me about my memo. I said, "He was not there. He was at the dining room. He was crying." They asked me, "How can you remember that?" I said, "Because he said, 'They're burning my home.'"

I also remember (and I put this in the memorandum too), I had also approached Commissioner Owens and said – and I was really chewed out for this, I said, "Commissioner, you have about half a dozen or so inmates working here at the central office dining room. Have you given any consideration to sending them to another institution where they won't be colored like they were a part of the riot?" And he just jumped down my throat. I was concerned about the inmates who were not involved in the least.

But there was a concern that Keith was involved in the first day of the riot, and yet he was up there working, and yet he was also the one that gave me a heads up about five weeks before about a riot was going to occur. That just didn't make sense to me.

He [Keith Smith] did admit to me that he was raiding the food shelves for food, because he thought it was going to last a long time, but I never heard any proof about him being an organizing member.

The Board of Pardons clearly brought that up. When they said, "He was seen that first day." I said, "He was in the dining room working." I gave everybody the memorandum before, and it was like that was a bombshell that hit them. The attorney general started to argue with me. I

think it was Corbett. I said, "No. He was here. I can remember him." I was asked, "How can you remember an inmate?" I said, "First of all, I represented him before the Board of Pardons. Secondly, he used to make me sticky buns and bring them up to my office and not the commissioner's. So, I knew him. He was he was there. He was crying." And I said, "Without question and there was about half a dozen other inmates who were there to too." So, I think that played, in my mind, a major... was a major consideration in them granting him... recommending him for commutation of his life sentence... that someone could actually come up and say, "No, he wasn't in the prison. No, he wasn't involved, and you have the best eye witness you can have."

McNaughton: So, did they send him and the [other] inmates back inside Camp Hill?

T: Absolutely. I was dumbfounded that they did that. I mean that was just mean spirited.

McNaughton: Then what did Keith do the next night when it started up again?

T: He was inside the institution.

McNaughton: Now there... I heard rumors that he may have been involved with that night.

T: I don't know either, but he wasn't the first night. Just dumbfounded, disappointed, shocked that they would send those innocent inmates, non-participatory inmates back in so they could be judged like everybody else. I mean I would've begged... pleaded if I were an inmate, "Don't send me back in there. I didn't do anything." It was a travesty.

McNaughton: They could have locked them in a basement room or something to keep them separated...

T: Yeah, until some institution sent a van down.

Do you remember the fact that the helicopters dropped down black clad personnel inside the institution?

McNaughton: So, are these the ninjas?

T: Yeah, those are the ninjas.

McNaughton: We all talk about the ninjas.

T: Oh, so other people have heard of them? They were black clad... right outside our window to the right, and it was between the building and the fence. Didn't you see those?

McNaughton: You know, it's... I can't tell what I actually remember seeing or what I remember seeing from the video. I do have a video that has them coming in.

T: Well, if that was during the day then I took that probably

McNaughton: It was at night, and they were rescuing somebody on a gurney.

T: Oh, then I didn't take that one. I saw that though. I thought probably it was too dark to videotape.

McNaughton: It was dark, but here came these stealth people in black protecting the individual on the gurney...

T: That was the guy who was probably at the weightlifting station. I know inmates tried to carry him out... oh, I remember... the ninjas took the officer out, and the inmates went out with them sort of as a protective detail... far enough away so they wouldn't get into trouble or be confused with trying to re-assault the individual.

McNaughton: You had quite a vantage point – much different than we did from the windows. A lot of the stuff that you talk about happening beyond those cell blocks... I couldn't see.

T: Oh, I had a pair of binoculars, because days when I was bored to death, I had them in my office and I would look at the institution and see what was going on. And in the rear [of the facility]... I forget what day this was, but there were questions about state police on horses. Was that mentioned?

McNaughton: Yes, I interviewed some of the troopers that were on horseback. But I didn't know that because I couldn't see that.

T: I could see that, and it's amazing. Horses don't like to step on people. And there were all these inmates in the back... at the very, very rear of the institution and the horses were just walking around, just stepping right next to the inmates, and the inmates were like, petrified I'm sure and just stationary, but I thought that was a marvelous example of crowd control by the horses, but I saw that with my binoculars.

McNaughton: So, the horses were tip-toing around and over the inmates...

T. Exactly. But I saw that. I couldn't videotape it because the video [zoom] wouldn't go back that far, by my binoculars did. And if you recall, the troopers used to eat in our cafeteria, and I had spoken to a lot of troopers ... every barracks was required to give so many troopers to Camp Hill over the course of a year or so. It was supposed to be a bad job, and it was in one sense, because it required terrible shifts and boring work. But many of the troopers I talked to – I would just ask them straight out, "Were you selected." And they said they weren't but that they bought out one of their other buddy's term here. Do you remember what they were doing? Well they were there for a substantial time, and what the troopers were doing was ... the older troopers would buy the assignments from the younger, newer troopers ... and the barracks didn't care who went as long as somebody went... The troopers were going to Camp Hill to enhance their retirement, and the troopers said that they were going to make a huge amount of money not just w/overtime, but with retirement because it's the best three years, and they were bumping up their salaries tremendously. I remembered that for my own retirement.

McNaughton: There were some I interviewed who said it was a great pension builder.

T: It was, because that could just bump it up tremendously. I think it was a six-month tour, 12 hours a day, which automatically meant four hours of overtime. Then you add that... some troopers said, "I'm doing this as a pension builder."

McNaughton: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

T: Can you turn that off and let me think for a minute?

McNaughton: Sure.

END