

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Thomas Rogosky
Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots**
Interview Date: August 20, 2019
Interviewer: DOC Communications Director Susan McNaughton

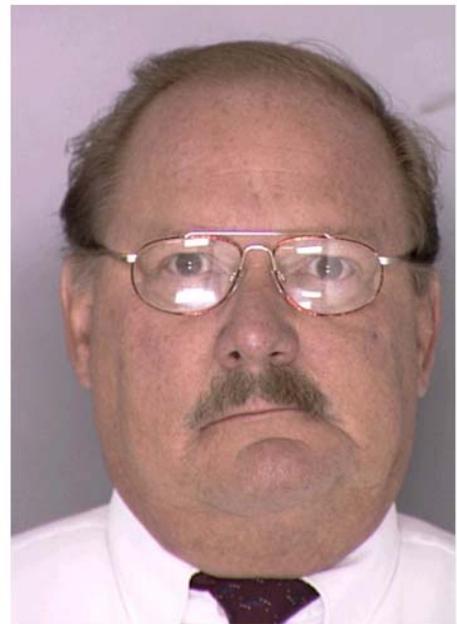
Interview Transcript

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 Thom Rogosky. Thank you for joining us, Thom.

Rogosky: You're very welcome.

McNaughton: Before we begin, Thom, could you please provide us with a brief overview of your DOC career. Tell us at which facilities you worked, which offices you worked and the titles that you held and then when you finally retired.

Rogosky: I began my career as an intern out of the Penn State graduate program. I started as a counselor intern at the Harrisburg Community Corrections Center, which was at 9 S. 10th Street. I was there for about 10 or 12 weeks, and then I was hired as a corrections counselor at the York CCC in 1972. I worked there for about 8 or 9 months and was hired as the staff assistant to the director of community corrections in the DOC Central Office. I was in that position for a while and then became the acting regional director of what was the southcentral region of community corrections in those days. There were six regions, and it was called Community Services [rather than Community Corrections, as it is now]. I was in charge of the southcentral region which encompassed Harrisburg, York and some other small, non-profit facilities. From there, for some reason, I was hired as director of records for the DOC in Central Office, and held that position for about a year. Then I became assistant director of Community Corrections in Central Office and remained in that position and became the regional director of a different region – region 2, which was the whole central area of Pennsylvania – Scranton, Allentown, Harrisburg, York, Johnstown and a number of contract facilities. I stayed in that



Thom Rogosky

position for at least 13 or 14 years and then was appointed director of Community Corrections. I remained there until I retired in 2003. From there I became a consultant with the Kintock Group in Philadelphia for about four years, and then retired completely.

McNaughton: Ok. Great. Wow. Very busy career. Let's go the Camp Hill prison riot in October 25 – it started in 1989. Tell me what you remember about it, how did it start, where were you and let's just talk about what you remember.

Rogosky: At the time I was regional director for Community Corrections and I can recall coming to Central Office one day and there were sirens everywhere. Someone had a police scanner and all we could hear was state police channels directing their people to the institution. At that time Community Corrections was in a small building at Utley Drive [near the Capital City Mall], so I went there, and we listened to a scanner there... it was the first day and realized things were going on. We could hear a deputy superintendent talking ... trying to talk to the inmates who apparently had a radio at the time ... and talk them into surrendering. The last we heard, it had calmed down that day. So, I went home and...

McNaughton: What time of day do you think that was?

Rogosky: That was later in the afternoon ... 5-ish when I left. The next day I just heard that everything had broken loose. I went to the Utley Drive office and kind of remained there for that day. Not really doing anything, but watching the smoke and everything.

McNaughton: So, the Utley Drive building was about a mile away from the Camp Hill prison, but certainly you could probably see the smoke outside of Utley Drive, right?

Rogosky: Yes, it looked like something out of "Apocalypse Now," with the smoke billowing and the helicopters and everything. I was able to drive the next day... I had an official car. The roads were blocked at the top of Slate Hill Road, but they let us go down, and we went down to the building. That evening... and I don't know what happened inside during that day, because I wasn't inside, but that evening we started in one of the horse barns... the National Guard had brought in stoves and set them up for us and we cooked 3,000 chicken TV dinners that night until about 4 o'clock in the morning.



McNaughton: So, this is October 26?

Rogosky: Yes, the second day. We were there most of the night, and they were taking the dinners in by truck.

McNaughton: These were dinners to feed the inmates?

Rogosky: Inmates and staff. In fact, the next day they were still using them to feed staff and inmates. We did that all night, went home, slept for a few hours and came back, and I went to Central Office and we made thousands of baloney and cheese sandwiches in the cafeteria all day long.

McNaughton: From there you could look out the window and see what was going on in the main yard area.

Rogosky: Yes. There were fires burning and the like.

McNaughton: How many feet from the fence would you say that part of the Central Office building was? You were pretty close.

Rogosky: There was a... you could drive a car through, and that was it, in back of the building by the kitchen.

McNaughton: So the width of a roadway and then the fence.



Rogosky: Yes. We were real close. I can remember some staff hollering at inmates to stop it through the fence. I don't know if it did any good.

McNaughton: And there was a guard tower right there too.

Rogosky: Yes. I don't know if anybody was in the guard tower or not. We did that for the whole day, and the next morning a group of us went into the institution – this is after the State Police had taken over the institution...

McNaughton: So, that morning? Saturday, October 28.

Rogosky: Yes. We went in and there was nowhere to house the inmates, because not only had the cells been ... the locking mechanisms tampered with and all that... but the inmates had hoarded everything they could find... and their cells were just full of steaks and anything you could think of that they could find laying around... they stuck in their cells. I don't know if they thought they wouldn't be cleaned out...

McNaughton: When you say steaks, do you mean like meat?

Rogosky: Meat. I can remember cleaning out one cell that must have had two dozen thick steaks in it.

McNaughton: Well, they were burning fires, maybe they thought they were going to barbecue.

Rogosky: They could have cooked them I guess. So, what we did was ... there was a group of us from Community Corrections ... counselors and monitors who all volunteered to go inside, and we started cleaning cells out. And by cleaning them out, we just took everything that was in the cell... absolutely everything that wasn't tied down... and threw it in the floor and we did that on the tier and they would come in with small bobcats (skid steers) and push it out the other side and then load it into trucks and pull them out until we have every cell cleaned.

McNaughton: Mattresses and everything?

Rogosky: Everything. Anything that was loose that wasn't tied down. We found three or four TVs in a cell and books and metal rods... and you name it, it was in there. We did that for two days. I don't remember how many hours, but they were long hours of just cleaning out as much as we could. Then the officers would come in once a cellblock was cleared... they'd search it for other contraband that might be hidden somewhere... before they were able to move inmates there. State Police were in while we were there... we called them the "ninjas." Because they were all hooded and carried their own water and food...



McNaughton: Tell me about the weather while you were cleaning out the cells. There's no air conditioning, obviously, and it was a warm spell. It must have been very hot.

Rogosky: Yes, it was. It was hot and smelly and the burnt smell from the buildings. Some of the food was rotting already, I'm sure. Yes. I can remember it was very hot for October. Unusually so. If it had been cold, it would have affected situation a lot differently than the way it was. I remember seeing the inmates cuffed to the fence, and the officers bringing them back one by one and putting them in the cells and locking the cells with chains and padlocks. I don't know where they got that many handcuffs, chains and padlocks, but they had them.

McNaughton: Do you remember, because somebody said they brought the inmates in to the cells four to six inmates at a time and every two inmates were handcuffed together. Do you remember that?

Rogosky: I don't remember seeing them... they were handcuffed, but I don't remember seeing them handcuffed [together]. They moved them with horses in groups when they could, and they strip searched them one by one and then put them in the cell.

I remember driving one day to state surplus to pick up raincoats that they had... they had hundreds of them. I don't know what they did with them, but I ran them over there and drove them in through the fence and delivered them and...

McNaughton: For staff?

Rogosky: Yes, I think they were for staff use. They were looking for anything, anywhere that they could use, I would imagine. It was a tough time for everybody.

I also remember... I believe it was Pizza Hut had a truck there... a food truck and was giving free pizza to all the staff and they were there for at least a full day and they would give out pans of pizza to whoever needed to be fed.

McNaughton: I heard about that afterward and was like, "Oh I had toast and I could have had pizza."

Rogosky: Yes. It was really nice of them. I'm sure that they made some fans there, but that was still very nice of them to do that. They were giving out lots of pizzas. It was an interesting time.

In Community Corrections, what we tried to do then, as soon as we could, was to take any inmates who were on our waiting lists... in any institution anywhere, because they were trying to place inmates wherever they could... and move them to Community Corrections immediately to free up bed space in our institutions. We did that for a good long time, whenever we could get somebody and move them as quick as we can. We'd move them out even if we had a double... use furloughs and double beds and try to make some space wherever we could, because we knew they needed it all over the place.

McNaughton: So, it also impacted community corrections system.

Rogosky: It did. We tried to do as much as we... it really didn't impact us except that we tried to help the institutions as much as we could by moving people out and making space. We had the ability to do that. Whereas they couldn't release inmates just anywhere. The people who came in with me to work in the institution to clean out the cells were from the Harrisburg and York

CCC's, and they spent two days cleaning out cells. It was an interesting time and a strange situation. I've seen some of the pictures. A counselor was taking pictures inside. He was inside taking as many pictures as he can of everything.

McNaughton: I did find a lot on the internet that I've never seen before.

Rogosky: Did you see ... I did... videocassettes. I was recording the news, because it was on 24/7 then. I was recording everything I could record, as much as I could, and I think I gave them to the prison's public information officer. There were two sets of them.

McNaughton: We had a bunch... being the Press Office, and I did hand them over to archives. Whether or not they can play them, because they are VHS, is a whole... that's their problem now.

Rogosky: It was, indeed, an interesting time and it affected the department. I had some of the officers who were injured work in the regional office where I was at the time... this was on Elmerton Avenue in Harrisburg. I had some working there to temporarily get them back to work.

McNaughton: But yet... not yet on the prison grounds... that would be too traumatic. Were some of those hostages?

Rogosky: I had three. No none were hostages, and none were physically injured. One was a woman who helped out with our secretarial stuff and the other two were tradesmen, as I recall.

That was mostly my involvement with it. I... at the time I was the region was getting support from Camp Hill... administrative, fiscal and supplies... a few years earlier Camp Hill's superintendent had offered for me to attend his staff meetings every week, and I did as much as I could, I was at the institution and continued that in 1989. I knew Camp Hill a little bit more than just somebody from community corrections. I sat at their staff meetings.

I've worked for every director of community corrections except one, and every secretary or commissioner except one... one and the present one.

McNaughton: When you were cleaning out the cells with everyone else, do you remember seeing things that you were like, "Wow, I can't believe they have this?"

Rogosky: Well, they had tools that they had stolen from wherever they broke into in the institution. Lots of food... a stack of steaks two feet high. Lots of TVs.

McNaughton: I think I remember reports, later on, of inmates filing grievances that things like their wedding rings were thrown away and stuff like that. Did we end up, do you recall, reimbursing them?

Rogosky: That I don't know. I never saw... we didn't save anything. The main purpose was to empty the cells to have places to put the inmates back to. I don't remember any jewelry or anything like that. At some points we were just sweeping stuff out the door, on the floor and out into the corridor and below.

McNaughton: Were there some of those cells that everybody knew there's no way you can even hold an inmate in there?

Rogosky: I don't know. After we cleaned the cells out, the officers came in and searched everyone. I think they hosed them out at some point in time, but they would make that determination whether there were plumbing problems or whatever.

McNaughton: Do you remember seeing holes busted through all of the walls?

Rogosky: Yes, and the cellblocks ... as you first go into the institution to the right... I don't remember what they were called... but those were the cellblocks that it looked like someone shot a cannon at one cell on the end and the cannonball went right through all the cells and came out the end. Because the walls were very brittle. It was built for juveniles and they were a ceramic kind of brick. Very smooth on the outside and the ceramic was baked on and they were very brittle, and you could see the holes right through...

McNaughton: They just went from one cell to the next right down the tier.

Rogosky: Yes. All the way down. Yes. You could see the burned-out buildings. Some of the amazing sites, in addition, where I'm driving over the hill on Lisburn going down to the Central Office [on the left] and on the right was full of State Police cars... the *whole* field. And then the next field was full of TV dishes... the *whole* field.

It was something to see. I remember the press person for Cumberland County coming out and saying [to reporters], "Please turn your cell phones off, the satellites are jammed, and we have no communications." So many things like that. So many press conferences. The press person from Camp Hill ... he was exhausted. He just...

McNaughton: He had been up, I forget what the reason was, but he was up most of the night before the 25th and then the 25th happened. So, he was extremely exhausted.

Rogosky: Three days at least he was up trying to get things done and answering questions. It was tough on everyone.

McNaughton: I think at some point he kind of barked back at a reporter and that's when the DOC press secretary said, "We need to relieve him."

Rogosky: Yes. He was exhausted. I went to see him one day...

McNaughton: I think everybody was... fatigued and in disbelief and shock.

Rogosky: It was a strange sight to watch the floodlights. I was up in the horse barn cooking the dinners, and you could see busses coming in and spotlights and leaving with inmates. I once talked to the director of treatment at Waymart...

McNaughton: They opened Waymart [early] as a result of the riots.

Rogosky: Yes. I remember him saying, "Open it up. They're coming." They had to put inmates wherever they could. It was a strange, interesting time. Probably ... [Thom's phone rang here]. It was an interesting time, and it affected so many people, so many jobs, so much... affected the

department so much because of huge inpouring of money... supplies and equipment for the whole system then. Additional institutions. Secretary Lehman came in right after that and a whole lot of things happened.

McNaughton: I know that they made a lot of policy changes... tool and key control... did any of that impact you in the Community Corrections system?

Rogosky: No, not really. We just kept doing what we were doing and tried to expand as much as we can. We expanded somewhat under Lehman, but we really grew under Secretary Horn... expanded all kinds of facilities, all kinds of services.

McNaughton: What I find interesting about the riots is that ... I guess in any major emergency, no matter what your title or classification, your dedication draws you to each other and you do what needs to be done. You were making sandwiches alongside of clerical staff...

Rogosky: Everybody. I was cleaning cells alongside monitors from centers and clerical staff and counselors, and everybody just pitched in and helped.

McNaughton: Interesting, and probably a shame too, that after such an emergency situation, that's when everybody pulls together. Like you really felt the family and comradery after. Would you agree with that? [Phone rings again]

Rogosky: Yes. Everybody just volunteered and wanted to help, and it was dirty, hot, sticky work because it was very warm then and we were in confined areas with no air conditioning doing physical labor to help get some space available as soon as we could, and ate some of those chicken TV dinners too, because there was nothing else there to eat. Yes. And I still have some scars from the stoves... they were not very effective... they somehow worked on gas. The National Guard brought in about eight of them, and I don't know where they got the frozen TV dinners, but we had to put them in, cook them, try to figure out they were hot, take them out, get them in a truck and then, one guy ... the automotive guy... that's all he did was drive truck back and forth. The institution stayed in that locked state for a while... a good while. The State Police were in there for a long time, which they enjoyed I think.

McNaughton: Who, the State Police enjoyed?

Rogosky: Yes, lots of overtime, and many of them retired shortly thereafter.

The other amazing thing I remember seeing was... driving up Rt. 15 and watching just rows and rows of state police vehicles coming off the turnpike... lights flashing... 30 or 40 or 50 vehicles at a time.

McNaughton: I've heard other people talk about that... that they were on the Turnpike and be passed by rows and rows...

Rogosky: Rows and rows of them, flashing their lights and moving. You remember the hill [across from Central Office] how big that was... it was full of State Police vehicles. And the next hill full of TV dishes... everybody... ABC, CBS, NBC... CNN was small then. But they were all there. There were no celebrity announces, though, that I saw. I guess we weren't quite that

big, but it was ... a friend of my who was in Kuwait [at the time] and he heard about it on Kuwait TV.

McNaughton: I do think Tom Brokaw called at one point, but I didn't get to see any of that because I was stuck at my desk answering phones.

Is there anything else you want to mention that we might have forgotten or not gotten to?

Rogosky: No. I think that's pretty much it. You'll get more interesting things from those who were inside. I do know that the Academy folks all armed up and headed there to help out as much as they could, and they did get the cadets/students... corrections officer trainees... who were in the classes there into the institution also.

McNaughton: Well, that's quite a way to start your career.

Rogosky: Yes, it is.

McNaughton: I'd love to hear from some of those people.

END