

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Jeff White  
Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots**  
Interview Date: September 12, 2019  
Interviewer: DOC Communications Director Susan McNaughton

**Interview Transcript**

**McNaughton:** Welcome to the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' Oral History Project where we are recording 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, September 12, 2019, is Jeff White. Thank you for joining us, Jeff.

**White:** Thank you.

**McNaughton:** Before we begin, could you please provide us with a brief overview of your DOC career – tell us at which facilities you worked, and the titles you have held.

**White:** I was a corrections officer 1 at SCI Camp Hill. I started in February of 1981 and retired in February 2009.

**McNaughton:** Great. Thank you, and you were a CO1 when you retired?

**White:** Yes.

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

**White:** I'm actually on my days off. I was in Lancaster... my grandfather was operated on. I was with my mother and my grandmother. I came back to New Cumberland. In addition to working at the prison, I coached football at Cedar Cliff High School. I went out to football practice, and I noticed all of the state cop cars flying by Cedar Cliff High School. I kind of scratched my head a minute and I turned around and the high school principal was standing there, and he said, "Jeff, There's a major incident going on over at the prison. I thought you might need to know that." I said, "Yes." I went inside, made some phone calls and finally got a hold of somebody at the prison, and they didn't want any extra help. They told us, "Regular days off. Regular shift." So, I did my thing.



Jeff White

The next day was my second day off, so, I went back to Lancaster. I came back to football practice, and then went out to dinner with my wife at Gullifty's. We had just walked into Gullifty's, when someone walked in and said, "They're rioting at the prison again." I looked at my wife and said, "I have to go to work now. Something's wrong." So, I went home, put my uniform on, went to work and I was there for three to four days. It's kind of a blur.

When I got there the second night, I had just gotten there, and they were bringing the last person out from above the control area... they were trapped. I was up on the roof there. They had us stay up there with security. There were some concerns that the inmates might get up there and they were running around in the Group 1 hallway. I was up there for... I don't know how many hours. Then after that, we came down, and we were by the main gate most of the time.

And then, I guess it was... I can't remember, it all runs together... but was it Friday morning or Saturday morning when the state police and corrections people came in the back and took the prison back. We were there, and they went in the cell blocks and we secured them. We had them [the inmates] all out on the main field.

**McNaughton:** Um hmm. That would have been Friday.

**White:** Yeah. We did the best we could and got some of the people who were hostages out, and had the rest of them out on the main stockade field.

At some point in time, I had sprained my ankle and was limping around. One of the captains said, "Why don't you go get a vehicle and bring it in, and you can transport people to the dispensary or do whatever we need to do?" So, I was kind of like the errand boy for the next few days... taking people – inmates and staff members – to medical.

Also, kind of an interesting thing... There was an inmate – that I don't know how they got a hold of him – but, he was... the state police were set up in the administration building outside of Camp Hill on the third floor. I got called to go out there. So, I went out there, and they had an inmate up there from J Block, which was the block that I was working regularly. He was giving the state police information, but he couldn't identify guys... he knew their nicknames and he knew what cells they lived in. I was able to provide the information that they needed to put out some of the perpetrators from J Block and different places. They interviewed him, and then I ended up with another officer... we took him up to... they got him out of there... took him to Cumberland County Prison and held him up there.

**McNaughton:** Did you help with that escort?

**White:** Yes, I did it... me and another officer.

**McNaughton:** For a long time the count was off, and I know that they were... I talked to Lt. Smith... They talked about the fact that it came down to this one inmate and you were being very tight-lipped about the fact that you took an inmate out.

**White:** Yeah, because he was giving us information... giving the state police information and nobody... they didn't want to say anything. Kind of between you and me...

**McNaughton:** Well, hold on... this won't be between you and me, because I'm recording.

**White:** It doesn't matter really. The state police commander, Commissioner Walp, I believe, he was very... annoyed with corrections people, because he was trying to work this out and talk to them, and they weren't being real cooperative with him as far as this guy and getting this guy moved up there. Finally, one of the captains told me, "Just get another officer and you take him up to Cumberland County Prison and take care of business." So, that's what I did.

**McNaughton:** It took several days for count to clear. They knew who they were looking for, they just weren't sure where he was, because they didn't have record of him being sent anywhere. Once you came forward... when John Palakovich said to, "You need to come forward and tell us what you know,"... count cleared.

**White:** Yeah. I remember that now. I didn't remember that at the time. It was a total state of confusion. Nobody knew what the right hand was doing or what the left hand was doing. I took him up there under the assumption that we weren't going to say anything, and that it was already cleared by everybody, and everybody knew what was going on. Obviously, that wasn't the case.

**McNaughton:** You take him to Cumberland County and you come back to the facility, what happens after that?

**White:** After I came back. By that time... and I can't remember the exact timeline... I took people back and forth to the dispensary... took care of the officers – made sure they had stuff that they needed out on the field.

I remember when they... they went somewhere and had to get a bunch of flex cuffs. I think they came from Baltimore or someplace with these flex cuffs. I remember meeting those people out at the gate and drove the car up with the flex cuffs and taking them out to the main field where all of the inmates were.

The next major thing was when all of the buses showed up. They had buses lined up all the way around the jail pretty much. We started strip searching them [the inmates] and loaded them on the buses to go to federal institutions, some other state prisons. We started doing that process of getting them out of Camp Hill.

Then I'm not sure after that what exactly happened. I was there for like four days... it was kind of like a blur after a while.

**McNaughton:** When you say you were there for four days... did you sleep?

**White:** No. I just... I just... I don't know. I just felt compelled that I had to be there, and everybody was kind of like leaving and going home to get some rest. I... finally... I forget who it was, but they said, "How long have you been here?" I said, "I don't know." He told me, "You better get the hell out of here and get some rest." So, I went home, got some sleep, came back to work and just did what we did.

It's kind of fitting that you're interviewing me... on not [only] my birthday, the 12<sup>th</sup> of September, but after 9/11. Things that happened at the prison kind of remind me of my birthday on the day after the terrorist attack. It was kind of like everybody came together at the prison. There was no... There was no dissention. There was no... it was like, "We got this thing. We gotta do this." Everybody just... it was amazing for the next six months to a year, how well and how much everybody just came together as a staff and did what had to be done.

**McNaughton:** Exactly. I mentioned that to somebody else. No matter what the differences are... you know, there's always that treatment vs. security conflict that goes on in our field... but when bad stuff happens, we all come together and, just like you said, we get stuff done.

**White:** It was like "rally around the flag, boys," and it was like we just... we rally. With few exceptions, it was the way it was. Now, obviously, it was...

Something I should throw in there is... prior... my last day working prior to the riots... an inmate that I had on J Block... a lifer who was very quiet and didn't say anything to anybody... didn't bother with me too much... of course, they had been around a while and they knew when you were... he comes up to me and says, "Hey, you got a couple days off coming up, don't you?" I looked at him kind of funny, because he never really said too much to me. I said, "Yeah." He said, "Be careful when you come back to work." It really... this guy was basically quiet as a church mouse and never said anything to anybody, and I was like, "Wow, that's pretty..." ...and of course there were some rumblings going around. The month prior they canceled the track meet because they had rumors that something was going to happen.

I called my lieutenant up, and I wrote a little incident report saying what this guy told me. I don't know whatever happened to the incident report. I know the lieutenant turned it in, but I don't know what transpired.

There were some warning signs that something was going to happen. The climate wasn't good. The climate there was actually going down hill for a few years. When they fired a captain and two others over an incident in the RHU, it was... the officers and everybody were just like, "Well, they don't have our back. They're not going to..." and a lot of things were let go. It was like people would walk around with their hands in their pockets. They would see things that were going on and they would just let it go, because it was... everybody was fearful of...

**McNaughton:** Getting fired.

**White:** Yeah, they wanted their job. That kind of set the tone for us... and then they took some things away, as far as like the Family Days. That just kind of escalated it even faster.

Then the two deputies didn't get along with each other. The superintendent just stayed in his office and didn't come in the institution. You very rarely saw him inside the institution. It was just...

**McNaughton:** Kind of like a perfect storm.

**White:** Yeah, in a way. It was. We had some really good... I really felt bad for Major Stover, because he was a good guy and he wanted to do the right thing by the officers, but he was hand strung by his supervisors, and he got a bad rap from a lot of the officers because they felt that he didn't stand up for us. I don't feel that way. I think he did, but I just don't think he was in a position that he could really do much. We had some good captains and good lieutenants that were good leaders that would know what to do, but they were just basically ignored, maybe... their opinions didn't count.

**McNaughton:** Or overruled maybe.

**White:** Yeah. They just took it with a grain of salt and said, "We can do this." I was involved with our union, I was the executive vice president, but I went to all these meetings that we had after the riot, and I remember going to the one meeting... It was... they were rather tense... sometimes volatile. People were... it was a stressful time. It wasn't... but I remember, we were pointing out all of the things that led up to this. I said, "You need to really take a look at your [employee] sick leave here." I'd been hearing ... and at that time I was there since 1981... we had never had people call of like we had in the last 12 weeks [prior to the riot]. Back then guys didn't do that. It's not like today's world... you just didn't want to screw your buddy. You didn't want your buddy to have to work overtime because you didn't feel like going to work. I brought that up and it was amazing... maybe a month later, they came out and they said, "The Department of Corrections has a new formula now and we're taking a look at sick leave and trying to determine the climate of the institution." Whoever it was listened and went and looked and said, "Wow. This is a problem."

They brought Dr. Beard in he was... he brought Deputy Kyler with him and they were strong leaders, and Deputy Kyler was very respected and knew what to do. They were both good men, and they got the ship righted. We moved forward. It was... it... it's hard to explain.

The real heroes in all of this are the guys that got beaten up and held hostage.

I did forget... I did do a lot of hospital runs when I was with that vehicle. I would go out and pick up officers that were at the hospital maybe just for injuries. I picked up... they had inmates over at the hospital. I'd pick up officers and inmates and bring them back. When I say hospital, I'm talking about Harrisburg, Polyclinic, Holy Spirit and even Hershey. They had them all over the place.

**McNaughton:** You were doing a lot of driving.

**White:** It was... yeah. It was just a lot of stuff going on. You don't understand. They got stuff... the local people were great. A lot of businesses helped. There was a local hardware store... they came in an opened [their doors] and gave us whatever we needed. I forget what it was.

Domino's showed up with their pizza truck and went right inside the institution ... in front of the kitchen and were there for a couple of days feeding everybody. It was... I forget where they got... of course, all of the local fire companies that assisted. It wasn't just the people inside the institution. We had a lot of support from outside people.

I remember... Channel 27... they had a show and they interviewed us. Specifically, I had requested it, because we wanted to thank those people that helped us from the community. I don't know if you could contact them. I don't remember the show. It was a lady. It was at lunchtime. They filmed us right out in front of the prison there. We thanked all of the people that helped us.

Hempt helped us with fuel or gas. Just so much that it...

**McNaughton:** I just want to go back to the Domino's. I heard that there were pizza trucks, but I thought that they were outside the gate. So, when you say they were inside the institution in front of the kitchen, you mean in Group 1?

**White:** Yeah, they came right in the institution. They parked right in front of Kitchen 2.

**McNaughton:** And when was that... not during the riot?

**White:** No, it was after we had everything under control. I believe they [the inmates] were still out on the field. We got them all under control out on the main stockade field. I remember going over there with the car and picking up pizzas and delivering them... taking them around to where the guys were and taking them to the state police. I don't remember the exact timeline, but I knew it was when we had them... it was after things were under control.

**McNaughton:** Yeah, I couldn't imagine that we would let anybody in like that during the riot, so that was a stupid question of mine. Sorry.

**White:** No. I just saw a couple of guys working this truck and they just never missed a beat. They came in there and it was... the guys appreciate that.

**McNaughton:** I did want to ask you... I just want to go back to when you're standing on top of the building where control center was. There's a couple of things I want to ask you about. First, did you actually help get the trapped people out of the building, or did you come to that point after they were already out?

**White:** No, I came... they were... I was there when they brought some of the last ones out. When I was going inside the institution, people were helping them out. Somebody threw me a shotgun and said, "Get up on the roof and watch out for these guys running around in Group 1 and trying to get up there."

**McNaughton:** While you were up there, explain to me what you were seeing. Talk to me about the fires. You were up there for a good while, so you had a pretty interesting vantage point.

**White:** Yeah. Yeah. You could see all over the institution, and the only modular unit that didn't burn was the one where New Values was... the drug and alcohol unit down by Kitchen 1. That didn't burn, but the rest of them were on fire.

We were... at that time rumor was that Officer Mauer... who was the longest hostage held... that the last time they saw him he was handcuffed to a railing down in one of the modular units that was burned to the ground. There was a lot of thought that we probably lost him. I came to find out later that they [the inmates] took him up to J Block or K Block somewhere.

**McNaughton:** Well, thank goodness.

**White:** I don't know if he would talk to you. He's a remarkable guy, and he went through a lot of stuff. He actually had... he was out for a long time. He came back to work, and they made him a counselor with Jim Auxer. Of course, that wasn't a real good move, because Auxer dealt with all the... for the lack of a better term... he dealt with most of the crazies... the mental health inmates. The poor guy... an inmate jumps them, and he has to get into a fight with an inmate when he's with Auxer. Of course, he went back out [on leave], and they settled with him and he worked at Labor & Industry then. A tremendous guy. He had a lot of problems with his hands from being tied up and handcuffed and things... you would see him, all of the time, rubbing his wrists and rubbing his hands that were bothering him.

Another one was Tommy Campbell. He... I know this for a fact, because when I went down to Hershey to pick somebody up, the one doctor told us that ... you know how they cut a boxer's eye to relieve the pressure when his eye swelled up? They did that with Tommy's leg, because they had beaten him with 2x4's. They had to slice his legs to release the pressure. They were that swollen. He came back to work and finished his career down at the rear gate. He worked there until he retired.

Those guys are the heroes. We were just there doing what we had to do because that's what we did. Those guys ... Bernie Venesky, Joe Keefer... those guys were... Riley Arnold... I mean, what can you say?

**McNaughton:** Jeff, I want to thank you for participating in this project.

**White:** Well, thank you very much. I think this is a good thing that you're doing. It's kind of like 9/11. We'll never forget.

**McNaughton:** Right.

END