

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Rex Hildebrand
Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots**
Interview Date: August 15, 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 15, 2019, is Rex Hildebrand. Thank you for joining us, Rex.

Hildebrand: Thank you very much I'm pleased to be here.

McNaughton: Before we begin, could you please provide us with a brief overview of your DOC career, what facilities you worked at, the titles you held, that kind of thing?

Hildebrand: Sure. I started as a corrections officer at SCI Camp Hill in 1979, and I was a corrections officer for a little over 13 years, and then I was a counselor for about four years at Camp Hill, prior to transferring out to Central Office, and I worked in what was then known as the Bureau of Inmate Services, currently the Bureau of Treatment Services. I finished my career there – I was an inmate classification systems analyst initially, I did become a supervisor later on, and ultimately, I was promoted to the classification division chief. So, I retired in August of 2013 from that position.

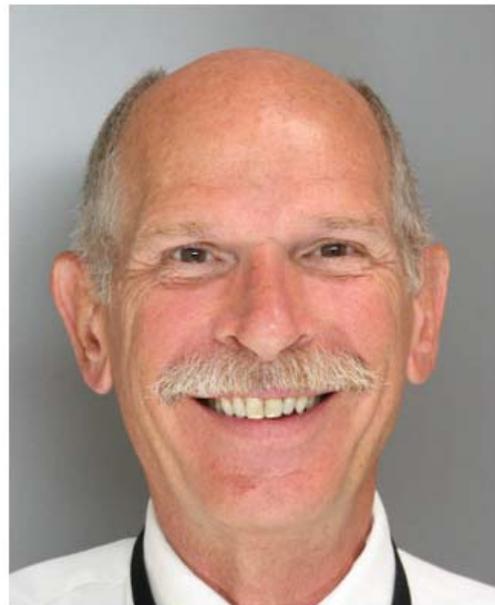
McNaughton: And you've been back a couple of times as an annuitant...

Hildebrand: Yes, actually, I think four times now.

McNaughton: Let's talk about the Camp Hill Riot.

Hildebrand: OK.

McNaughton: You and I had a discussion prior to this interview where you mentioned to me that you were not working at the prison at the time of the riot.



Rex Hildebrand

Hildebrand: Right.

McNaughton: Tell me what led up to your being off, and then tell me about your experiences immediately after the riot, around the riot.

Hildebrand: OK. The backdrop, in my particular instance, the backdrop is important. Actually, for most of the people that you're talking to, who were there during the riot, the backdrop ... I'll bet you they probably don't talk much about it.

In my experience, that was critical to help understand what my ultimate experience was like. In the time period – probably for a year or two leading up to the riots – let me go back to something else.

As a corrections officer, one of the ... you're all about care, custody and control of inmates. But one of the really most important things you're always focused on is protecting each other. Because it's a very volatile population, and things happen all the time and people can get hurt. Inmates get hurt. Staff get hurt. So, the corrections officers are constantly watching each other's back, and it's all about protecting each other. I worked with a lot of very fine people, and these are normal human beings. They have spouses. They have children. They have lives outside of the prison, but when they are in that prison, they are looking out for everyone around them. It's a huge part of the job. The control of a prison... I always looked at it as -- kind of an interesting concept... you know, if you're on a housing unit and there's two officers and there's approximately 200 inmates, that gets touchy. If you're in the dining hall while we're feeding inmates and there's six, maybe there's eight officers, if you're lucky, but the dining room holds 400 inmates. Control of that situation is really not... it's really not in the direct control of the staff. The staff have control because the inmates allow it.

McNaughton: I've heard that, yeah.

Hildebrand: Yeah. If they don't allow it ... we have mechanisms in place for isolated incidents... we handle them, and we control those isolated incidents, small scale. But what we're here to talk about today is not that.

McNaughton: Right.

Hildebrand: So, control is a huge concept there. Leading up to the riots... there were some... a lot of changes taking place in the local administration – policies.

McNaughton: Now, let me interrupt you here... at this time, were you a CO or a counselor?

Hildebrand: I was a CO. I was a CO up until about three years after the riot. I can't remember much about specific policy changes that were taking place, but I remember that they had a tendency to impact our ability to exercise control. One thing I remember is misconducts.

McNaughton: OK

Hildebrand: Inmates misbehave, they act out, they refuse to obey an order – whatever the case is, and the officer writes a misconduct and that goes before a hearing examiner. Typically, in years past, there was a sanction. They were almost always upheld, rarely were they dismissed, and there was some kind of sanction which might even be placing them for a period of time in the restricted housing unit. These policies were changing, and what, as officers, what we saw was that more and more misconducts were being dismissed. More and more times, the most

serious misconducts where there was restricted housing unit time as a sanction, that time was then cut short and the inmate released.

McNaughton: Was this because of overcrowding? I guess you might not know.

Hildebrand: I can't necessarily say. I was a corrections officer 1, so what was behind these policy changes, I don't know.

McNaughton: That must be frustrating as the person on the ground...

Hildebrand: Extremely.

McNaughton: ... seeing all of these changes but not knowing the reason or the rationale behind it.

Hildebrand: Correct. What the perception, for corrections officers, was eventually – and this developed over time – eventually it was like, “There’s really not much point in writing misconducts.” Unless it was something like a fight or an assault or something really serious like that, but the less serious things -- like refusing to obey an order, being disrespectful -- some of those other things that we didn’t even think twice about writing a misconduct for... you’d just let it go.

McNaughton: Well, that sent a clear message to inmates, then, didn’t it?

Hildebrand: It does. It does. That kind of thing starts affecting morale among the staff, and it does affect the attitude of the inmates and it, sort of, becomes a vicious cycle that worsens. The morale issue was made even worse because we started finding that – every year corrections officers at the beginning of the year had an opportunity to pre-schedule their vacation time. Or at least they did back then, I don’t know how they handle it now. We pre-scheduled vacation time, but anytime during the year you had personal days that you could schedule, and of course, we had sick leave. The personal days – what we found – was that they were never being approved. They were always denied, and I remember one particular instance where, one of the guys... his brother was getting married and he was to be the best man. So, he put in for a personal day, and that was denied.

McNaughton: Oh, my.

Hildebrand: That kind of thing, coupled with all of the other changes that were taking place, morale, really, I had never seen it like it was prior to the riot. As that got worse, the local administration started doing other things that affected inmates directly. They started taking things away from the inmates.

McNaughton: Such as?

Hildebrand: They used to have family picnic days. It was a huge thing to the inmates, and it was a huge security issue, but it was handled. So, there may have been valid reasons for eliminating it in that atmosphere.

McNaughton: For family picnic days, if I recall correctly, they would erect tents in the yard and the inmates’ family members could bring in food items in baskets. From a security standpoint, having to check everything to make sure they’re bringing in just food items would be a huge concern.

Hildebrand: It was. Absolutely. They stopped those. I can't remember what other things they did, but there were a series of things that they took away from the inmates. In this atmosphere that had been brewing for quite some time, they now started taking things away from the inmates, and they already had lost a lot of respect for corrections officers because of how misconducts were handled. The officers weren't writing near as many misconducts. It was a really, really bad scenario. All of that contributed to the "feel" of the institution. Every institution has a feel. Staff walk in there everyday and they are not necessarily cognizant of the feel of the facility, but they know it. They know that feel. It's either more positive or more negative, it's rarely neutral. The feel at SCI Camp Hill at that time was horrible. It was... you felt it every day, not even when you walked through the gate, but as you drove down the hill to the parking lot. You felt that.

McNaughton: A heavy dread and burden?

Hildebrand: Yes. The dread of going back in there again, but you go in every day and you do what you have to do and at the end of the day, hopefully, you leave. With all of that that was going on, the feel that I was experiencing was that there's doom pending. It just felt like something was going to happen. I felt it every day. I felt it all day long.

McNaughton: Over how much time? What was the period that you felt this doom, like years?

Hildebrand: No. I wouldn't say years, but I would say months.

McNaughton: So, in 1989?

Hildebrand: Yes. During 1989, probably over like about a six-month period of time. It felt so bad to me and so dangerous, and with all of the changes taking place, I decided I wanted out. I had 10 years of service, so my retirement was vested. I knew it wasn't going to be much of a retirement at that point, but it was vested, and I could collect. I made a decision. I had pre-scheduled vacation time coming up, and I decided I'm leaving on vacation. I'm going to get another job. If I can start another job, I'm making a phone call and telling them I won't be back. And the day I left -- I will never forget this -- the day I walked out that main gate, as I was walking up the parking lot towards my car, I remember turning back and looking back at the main gate and I just felt this sigh of relief and I thought to myself, "Thank God I made it out of there today and I never have to go back." And so, I left.

I went on vacation. I did find a job. I had found a job before I left on vacation, but unfortunately while I was on vacation, the job fell through. So, I didn't have a job to go to, and I was considering that I might have to actually go back.

McNaughton: So, you hadn't actually talked to anyone about your plan, nobody at the prison?

Hildebrand: No. Only my wife. No one else. The job fell through while I was on vacation and a couple of days later I got really deathly ill. I had an extremely aggressive intestinal virus and I became extremely dehydrated. I must have... at that time in my life I must have only functioned on a brain stem, because if I would have had even half a brain I would have been in the hospital. I really was that sick. I was lying on the floor because I had no energy and that's where I was when I heard that the riots kicked off. Lying on the floor... in my house.

McNaughton: Wow.

Hildebrand: What happened with the riots... you know, I talked about the control issue and how the inmates allow us to control the facility... well, on that day they stopped allowing us to control it. I always knew – from things I witnessed and been part of – I always knew the extreme and sudden violence that can occur in a prison. I had seen some things happen, and I've been involved in a few of those things, and I'd heard many other of my friends talk about the things that they had experienced over the years. So, I knew it could happen on a small scale. It was always small scale. I often thought about what that could be like if that was actually a large scale.

McNaughton: Right.

Hildebrand: That's just really, kind of, too frightening to contemplate, and here it was.

McNaughton: While you were laying on the floor, were they calling you in?

Hildebrand: Eventually. That didn't start for a while, but yes, they did start calling. My emotional reaction to this was really devastating, and it really kind of froze me and it really messed up my thinking and my logic. I was officially on approved leave, pre-scheduled approved leave. There was... back prior to the riots when they stopped approving personal days, that really aggravated a common practice, which was if something came up and you really wanted or needed to be off for something and you didn't have leave scheduled, you could try to... you could ask for a personal day, but there was always the chance that they would turn it down because they didn't have enough people assigned and whatnot. During this timeframe that we're talking about, that became the common practice. They just outright were always denied. Just like the guy that was supposed to be best man at his brother's wedding. When they started calling me... what people did if they needed the day off, they just called in sick. It's called kicking.

That's what... everybody did it. If you really needed that day off, you just waited until an hour before your shift and you make a phone call and say, "Oh, I'm sick." When they called me to ask me where I was, or we need you to come in, well, I was sick. I couldn't have gone in. But I didn't feel like I could tell them that. Because, when there's something that big going on, you don't care.

McNaughton: So, what did you do?

Hildebrand: I told them I was on vacation and I'll be back when my vacation's over. What a terrible thing to say.

McNaughton: Did you also, then, watch it on TV, because the local networks had preempted the network shows to actually show what was going on live. I'm sure, then, that you were watching it from home?

Hildebrand: Yeah. I saw some of that. I experienced a huge amount of guilt. I guess they call it unearned guilt or something to that effect. I experienced a huge guilt for not going in, when I couldn't have gone in anyway. And even if I could have gone in, it's not like I could have been Superman and saved the day. I just would have been another body helping, whether it be lined up outside the fence with a shotgun or if it was somewhere else putting sandwiches together. I mean, that's what a lot of people were doing. I didn't go in, and what I felt was that I wasn't there to help protect [pause]. Wasn't there to help protect my friends. [pause]

McNaughton: Even now, 30 years later, you're obviously very upset about this. What kind of emotional support or help did you get during this period of time, and did you go back inside?

Hildebrand: Well, what happened was... yes, I did go back inside. I waited until my vacation was over, but I was recovering from being sick. I was well enough to get out of the house, and I went to my doctor. When I was done talking to him I said, "Hey, can you give me an excuse to return to work?" He said, "Sure, where do you work?" I said, "I work at the prison in Camp Hill." And the look that came over his face was ... priceless. He said, "Yes, absolutely." So, he gave me a written excuse to justify why I was off all that time. When I did go back in, I had that excuse in my pocket, and do you want to know who I gave it to?

McNaughton: Who?

Hildebrand: A trash can. I didn't even have... I don't know what... I couldn't turn it in. I don't know why, but it's all about the guilt I was feeling, and... I guess I didn't feel worthy of having not been there. That's difficult, I think, for probably just about anyone to understand. That kind of sums it up.

McNaughton: What was the reaction from your fellow officers when they saw you... were they like, "Hey, welcome back from vacation look what happened," or...

Hildebrand: I was surprised by their reaction. I guess I was more well liked than I knew, because I was not received negatively, even though there were a lot of people that weren't there and I don't think everyone got warm welcomes if they weren't there, but nobody treated me badly. I was back for three days, and, you know, the things that I saw... when I left there, everything was intact. When I came back, everything was *gone*. It was all destroyed. That was just... that was just horrible to see. The staff were... they were doing ok, but, I mean, they had been through a lot and you could see that. You could feel that, but they were functioning and talking and whatnot.

I remember being at lunch... I think it was the third day I was back, and I was sitting with a bunch of guys – friends of mine – and as we were talking and chatting, I kind of... I kind of got quiet, and ... I don't really know how to describe this... but I had a physical feeling of something coming over me that sort of covered me... almost like a curtain dropped completely around me. Apparently, I was having some kind of emotional reaction and withdrawing. One of the guys at the table... noticed... I guess noticed the change. He looked at me, and he said something to me. I remember turning and looking at him, but I couldn't... I really couldn't respond to him. I just didn't say anything. And he said my name two or three times. He looked at me funny and he said, "Are you ok?" I never responded. It was a sergeant, and he started getting up and he said, "Come on, come with me." I got up, followed him. We walked out, and talked to psychology staff... the bottom line is that I was basically walked out of the institution and told to go home. I was off work for probably four months following that.

You asked about support... what kind of support did I have... They did offer debriefs, and of course, in my way of thinking at that time, I guess feeling like I wasn't... I didn't think I was worthy of being debriefed, so I didn't go. That's what I needed the most. I didn't go. Eventually I tried going to see a counselor at Holy Spirit Hospital – some young fellow. I tried to describe what I was going through, what I was experiencing, and how I felt. He offered me absolutely nothing. Nothing. No counseling sessions, nothing. I left there, and that, unfortunately, just sort of reinforced in my mind that I wasn't worthy of help. I've really dealt with it ever since. I've just pushed it down, and it most times stays down.

McNaughton: Tell me what it was like then. Obviously, you got kind of back to normal.

Hildebrand: Yeah, as normal as I can be. That was a lengthy time. It took about six years, and there are a lot of things... this really had a dramatic impact not just on me but also on my family. I won't go into all that, but it definitely had a dramatic impact on them too. It took about five years for me to reach a point where I was back to normal. You've seen me working here for years, you've seen me in the halls. I'm a pretty happy, pretty chipper guy.

McNaughton: Absolutely. I didn't know any of this actually.

Hildebrand: no. I have moments. There are sometimes things will trigger it for some reason and I'll think back to that, or even more than the actual riots... sometimes I think back to some of the impact its had on my family and those things are very upsetting. So, I have moments. And then, you know, I push it back down.

McNaughton: Right. I know our office was on the grounds of the prison overlooking the riot, and for many years after that helicopters bothered me... the sound of hovering helicopters would kind of trigger me and I had a coworker who later told me that I had PTSD. I was like, "Wow!" All those years later you realize... oh my gosh. Obviously, you've been back inside Camp Hill since then and you've seen the great changes that have happened, and do you want to talk about some of the changes that you've seen, how the prison is nothing like it was?

Hildebrand: Yeah, sure. It is nothing like it was. The majority of it has been rebuilt, as far as housing units is concerned. It had three groupings of housing units. Group 1 is still there and that's where some of the administration stuff is, inside the perimeter, and some of the services and things.

McNaughton: I have a map. Did you work in a specific part of the institution? Were you assigned to a certain block at the time of the riot?

Hildebrand: Yeah, at the time of the riots I worked in what was known as the modular units.

McNaughton: OH!

Hildebrand: Mod 4. When I went back they didn't exist.

McNaughton: Was that the red one?

Hildebrand: No, the white ones. The ones that were burned flat to the ground. Some of my friends were in there, in Mod 4, and got caught in there and tried to lock themselves in the bathroom, but the bathroom had a residential lock on it, it was... one guy was assaulted with a screwdriver, the other guy was beaten so severely on his wrists as he was trying to hold that door shut that he had such nerve damage that he never, ever had feeling in his hands again.

McNaughton: Oh, my.

Hildebrand: I often think to myself... I thought when I left I thought I had a plan and I... I thought I had a plan for my future, so to speak, before the riots; but ... and I thank God that He let me walk out of there one last time. But you know I don't think that was the plan He had in mind for me, because there's just too much... just the way things fell in place and happened... I don't think He wanted me to be in there, number one. I think He wanted me to maybe learn to have a better appreciation for my family and what they meant... and for Him. During the course

of five or six years, I learned all that. I think that was what really helped me kind of get back to being able to live a normal, functioning life. Ultimately, I think that enabled me to pursue advancements and get to where I was at the time I retired. I look back on it, and yeah, what a horrible experience. It's just... It's still extremely upsetting to think about it and contemplate it; but at the same time, a lot of good came out of it for me. I still feel badly and very guilty when I think about my friends that were there, but no one had ever said one word to me about that. They call it unearned guilt for a reason, but you still feel it.

McNaughton: Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about that we might have missed?

Hildebrand: Not on that side, but you did ask me if I wanted to talk about the rebuilding of Camp Hill... When they started building... demolishing old housing units and structures and started rebuilding housing units, I saw a lot of that. In fact, at one point I bid on a construction site position where I was the officer on the construction site. It was all fenced in, but that's where the construction workers were building the new housing units. I saw how they were build and put together, and I'll tell you what, they are very impressive. What a positive change from those old brick ovens that we used to have. Each cell is a solid concrete cell. They are insulated... pretty interesting to watch that. The design of the housing unit is far better. Instead of a linear design with... when you look at the way to the back of the tier... these tiers at Camp Hill were nothing like the ones, for example, at Graterford, which was two or three times the length... but at the back of that tier, there were steps that you couldn't see from the front, and that's where a lot of the stuff happened. The design of the new housing units didn't allow for any of that. There really are no blind spots. They had a central control center where they operated the doors, and they were isolated from the inmates. And then you had an officer or two that worked out on the floor. Very, very interesting change, and a very positive change. They did segment off the whole inside of the facility so that it would be a lot easier to try to contain incidents to a smaller area, because previously it was, pretty much, wide open.

McNaughton: Right. So, interior fencing...

Hildebrand: yeah. There was nothing to stop them from going from one small area to the whole jail. That's what happened. There were a lot of huge changes like that.

McNaughton: Tool control. Key control. Rekeying of doors?

Hildebrand: Yeah.

McNaughton: I talked to another individual who was a hostage, and also talked to our former secretary of corrections – Jeffrey Beard was brought in to help rebuild Camp Hill. They both mentioned the fact that one key could get you in the same door in every housing unit. That was a huge change. And tool control.

Hildebrand: Yeah, they got rid of all combustion engines and gasoline from inside... well, it could be brought in to do a specific job, but it had to be stored outside. Huge changes, and when you look back on it, most of those changes were things you almost have to sit and wonder to yourself, "Why in the world didn't we do that before." But that's how things run. You do what you always did.

McNaughton: I remember for a good while after the riot, and I mean probably several years, you would always compare to “this is how we did things before the riots.” Before the riot... it was such a *huge* part of our history and a huge change that it was either before or after the riot.

Hildebrand: Yep, it was just like the fulcrum. Quite a see-saw right, huh?

McNaughton: Yeah, very vivid still, even 30 years later. You’re not alone in that at all.

Hildebrand: I hear ya.

McNaughton: The debriefing could have been a lot better, but I wish you would have don’t that, although it wasn’t the best.

Hildebrand: I do too.

McNaughton: I think spending time with your family was the best thing for you, obviously.

Hildebrand: Yeah.

McNaughton: Is there anything else you want to talk about?

Hildebrand: No, I think I’m good.

McNaughton. OK.

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