

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Bill Harrison
Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots**
Interview Date: September 9, 2019
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, September 9, 2019, is Bill Harrison. Thank you for joining us, Bill. Before we begin, please provide us with your DOC employment history.



Bill Harrison

Harrison: I started out at Camp Hill as a governor career trainee counselor in 1969, and I progressed to counselor 1 and counselor 2 and ended up counselor supervisor and director of treatment in Camp Hill for the next 10 years. In 1968, [we think he meant to say 1978], I went out to be director of what was called the Program Division there [at Central Office]. It was later changed to a bureau level... Bureau of Treatment Services, then Bureau of Inmate Services and whatever it is now.

McNaughton: It's still Treatment Services right now.

Harrison: I retired in 2004 after 35 years.

McNaughton: Great. I didn't realize that you had worked at Camp Hill before that. When I started with the DOC you were the director of treatment services. So, you actually started at the prison before it was a prison... when it was a reformatory school.

Harrison: It had juveniles and adults mixed. They were exciting times, yes.

McNaughton: Let's talk about the Camp Hill Prison Riot. Where were on Wednesday, October 25, 1989, at about 3 o'clock?

Harrison: I remember getting a call or some kind of notice at about 5 [p.m.]. I was home grilling chicken... grilled chicken breast marinated in teriyaki and broccoli with cheese sauce on the side. I don't know why I remember that, but I do very vividly.

I took a quick shower thinking I'd be there a while, and I drove to Camp Hill. I crested the Lisburn Road hill and saw the fires and smoke and everything and I said, "Oh, my God. What's this going to bring?" I crested the hill and said, "What can I do? What can I do to help?"

Things I remember...

I witnessed the injured officer lying in the grass behind H ward [H Block], waiting for officers to rescue him when the inmates backed off. I watched them rush in and get him.

I remember going down later that night... Dave Horowitz [he was a DOC attorney at that time]... I found him in the kitchen making sandwiches. So, for an hour or two that night Dave Horowitz and I found stuff in the freezer. We sliced it and made sandwiches... wrapped them and took them down to the state police and other emergency crews that came to help during the riot.

McNaughton: So, that's something that you and Dave initiated on your own?

Harrison: Dave initiated it, and I just showed up at the right time to help.

McNaughton: Wow.

Harrison: Speaking of food. Either later that day or the next day or two, I was part of the assembly line making bag lunches for the inmates with other Central Office staff.

McNaughton: How did the first night end, and did you spend the rest of the first night working in the Central Office kitchen with Dave or what did you do?

Harrison: I was... I remember we were strategizing in Central Office what to do and all that, and I remember going back to my office around 1 or 2 o'clock [a.m.] and trying to catch a couple of hours of sleep at my desk, which I did.

I'm not sure of all the timeframe, but I remember the education [building] and the laundry catching fire and burning.

I remember seeing inmates roll up a propane tank/oxygen tank next to the fence and trying to make that ignite/explode and break the perimeter.

Of course, I witnessed the helicopters circling the institution. It was lit up like daylight with all of the rental lights around the perimeter.

At the end, I witnessed ... I remember the state police forming a line and going through the yard in order to... in an attempt to take the institution, which they ultimately did.

One thing comes to mind at the end after they did that... I remember saying, "Now all the lawsuits will start. Now all the fun begins."

I remember discussions about what to do with the inmates. There was some discussion about whether to move level 2 inmates – I was very close to the classification system, obviously – which is our least dangerous inmate and moving them to Waymart. It was ultimately decided since there were no inmates who had previous relationships, to just starting out with a fresh batch of inmates and moving them to Waymart.

McNaughton: When you were over Treatment Services, was records underneath you?

Harrison: Records was, correct.

McNaughton: What can you tell me about how the records office inside SCI Camp Hill was impacted during the riot?

Harrison: I just remember the records office staff talking about how the air conditioners were punched in and they had to vacate the office. I know some inmate records were messed up, but I don't know the extent, but since we had a duplicate of each inmate record ... the majority part of it... at our Central Office, so they were used to help restore what records weren't there.

McNaughton: Amazing, isn't it.

Harrison: It is, and time flies.

McNaughton: It does. It's going on nearly 30 years. For the first day, it ended around 11:30 [p.m.]... did you... what time did you go home?

Harrison: The first day... I don't recall.

McNaughton: Do you remember how you learned about the second night starting again?

Harrison: I don't remember specifically. I think I got a phone call.

McNaughton: And the phone call was just, "Hey, come in. We have an emergency."?

Harrison: Yes.

McNaughton: That was the night where it went into the night and into the next morning. So, Thursday into Friday morning is when the state police lined up and took over the facility.

Harrison: Yes.

McNaughton: Then it ended. Did you ever go inside to assist with securing inmates or cleaning out the cell blocks?

Harrison: No, I did not.

McNaughton: When you said you were helping in a line to make bag lunches. Where was that done?

Harrison: That was the second day...

McNaughton: I know that there was a National Guard kitchen brought in. Was that where that was done, or were you in the Central Office kitchen?

Harrison: We were doing it at the Central Office.

McNaughton: There was a lot of food being made all over the place.

Harrison: There was. I remember... a pizza place brought trucks in and supplied volunteers with pizza and refreshments.

McNaughton: Do you remember what it looked like around the perimeter at night when it was going on? You said it was lit up by generator lights?

Harrison: It was lit up with a bunch of rental lights like they use for outdoor events... very bright ones run by gasoline-powered generators. It was like a total daylight. They were all over the place.

McNaughton: I tend to recall the constant hum of those generator lights.

Harrison: And helicopters.

McNaughton: And the helicopters.

Harrison: Did you get the picture of the shirt I sent in?

McNaughton: I did. Thank you.

Harrison: That captures a lot of the helicopters and all of that.

McNaughton: Right, the helicopters constantly circling... that used to bother me shortly afterward.

Harrison: Yes.

McNaughton: How about you? Did you go through any debriefing, and was there anything that kind of triggered you to flashback to the riots at all?

Harrison: No. I didn't have any of that.

McNaughton: What other stories or recollections do you recall?

Harrison: I remember that the weather was beautiful.

McNaughton: It was, wasn't it?

Harrison: And I thought to myself, "On this beautiful day and look how it's being ruined." And at the same time, I thought, "Aren't we thankful that it was warm in the evening," because there were a lot of inmates that weren't involved outside spending the night. That I recall.

McNaughton: Thank you for participating.

Harrison: No problem. It's always nice talking to you.

McNaughton: You too. If you think of anything else you'd like to share, please let me know.

Harrison: I will do that.

McNaughton: Take care.

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