

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Bill Sprenkle
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, September 27, 2019, is Bill Sprenkle. Thanks for joining us, Bill. Before we begin, could you please provide us with a brief overview of your DOC career?

Sprenkle: I started with the DOC in 1975 as a part timer while I was in college and I worked in community corrections at the York halfway house. Later I went into the staff training area, where I worked at the Eastern Training Academy as the assistant chief. About a year and a half later I transferred to the Central Training Academy at Camp Hill as assistant chief. Then, a few years later, I became the chief of the Training Academy and was then promoted to the chief of state training and eventually director of staff training and development. Later I was promoted to deputy secretary for administration. After about two years as deputy for administration, I was promoted to executive deputy secretary, and I stayed in that position until I retired in April 2010.

McNaughton: Great career. I can't believe you're almost 10 years retired.

Sprenkle: I know. I was thinking about that yesterday, Sue, I couldn't believe it. My math must be wrong.

McNaughton: But retirement is treating you well.

Sprenkle: Yes, it is.

McNaughton: Good. Thank you for that fantastic overview. Now let me set the stage for this interview which is the Camp Hill Riot. It is Wednesday, October 25, 1989. It's about 2:30/3 o'clock. Where are you and what is happening?

Sprenkle: On that day, we had a class in session on Utley Drive, and we were notified that there was a disturbance at the Camp Hill institution, and we were dispatched over. We went in to what was to be the command post at the Central Office and provided technical assistance to the executive team.

McNaughton: Where was that command post located? Was that in the commissioner's office?

Sprenkle: It was ... that was prior to us having a real solid emergency preparedness program in place, and we spent some time in the conference room and most of the time in the Commissioner's Complex.

McNaughton: I don't remember seeing you, but you must have been very busy and in that room the entire time. The commissioner's office and his conference room were on the far side of the building facing away from the institution. Didn't everybody eventually move over to Deputy DeRamus' office to have a...

Sprenkle: They did. For a better view.

McNaughton: Who was in the room with you?

Sprenkle: We were sort of in and out of the command... we were really providing technical assistance at that time. Again, because it was prior to us having our CERT teams in place and an emergency preparedness system where we had real solid command post procedures, it was really just a sporadic thing. For instance, what type of weaponry we should be arming our staff with. What about the perimeter... securing the perimeter... what was going to be the best way of doing that? It was just really more in the tactical area in terms of our involvement at that point.

McNaughton: Ok. Let's talk real quick about weapons. Did we have enough?

Sprenkle: Well, we certainly had enough initially, but as we got more staff on site, we were really running out of... we were limiting ourselves to shotgun usage. In fact, many of us brought our personal weapons on site.

McNaughton: Wow.

Sprenkle: Yeah.

McNaughton: You mentioned securing the perimeter... how was that done?

Sprenkle: Camp Hill took the lead on it. They dispatched staff to surround the area... and local police. We had even the fire department involved at some point, adding additional perimeter security. It was a rather quick process to secure the perimeter. A very quick response.

McNaughton: When you talk about the command post that you were involved in, there was also a command post set up a football field away at the institution at the superintendent's office. Correct?

Sprenkle: Yes.

McNaughton: Everybody in the command post up in central office was in constant contact, by phone I guess, with the superintendent and his command post.

Sprenkle: That's correct.

McNaughton: Tell me... you're in DeRamus' office... what are you seeing out the window?

Sprenkle: Well, actually we spent some of the time in Deputy DeRamus' office and then we spent a lot of time outside... we were on a roof portion of the old central office building where we had more of an aerial view. It was more... at that point, initially... it was really an observation period. Obviously, the state police at that point were involved. They were dispatched, and that was really our limited involvement on that particular day... the first day.

McNaughton: Who was up on the roof with you?

Sprenkle: It was a lot of central office staff, and I believe there was some Camp Hill staff there as well, because of the.... It was just a perfect view to be able see exactly what was happening and watch... observe the inmates' movement. We could actually see them moving hostages around the complex.

McNaughton: And so for the listeners... the way central office was positioned... it was outside of the perimeter fence... not far outside the perimeter fence, but it was perfectly positioned where the view was on the compound in between all of the six housing units, which is where a majority of the rioting activity took place. It was the perfect view.

Sprenkle: Yes, it was. Very good view.

McNaughton: Things were on fire and then finally ended. Do you remember how it ended? Do you remember what time you went home? Did you go home?

Sprenkle: Yeah. I don't recall exactly what time I went home. I'm suspecting it was probably around 7 or 8 in the evening. Then I got a call to respond right around 10 p.m. that night when the riot, again, was initiated.

McNaughton: Let me back up. The first night kicked off at around 3 p.m. at E Gate, and went to about 11... there was feeding going on and everything. The next day, which was Thursday, October 26, everybody reported to work for a regular day. It wasn't until later that night around 6:30/7 o'clock that the second rioting started.

Sprenkle: That's correct. I don't know exactly what time that evening... I know it was late in the evening. I got a call... Camp Hill wanted us... the Academy team to participate in the initial movement into the institution. When we got there, we had our weapons, and we met a handful of Camp Hill staff... primarily commissioned officers... and at that point it was prior to a large state police deployment. We had a few state police on hand from the prior day. It was our job to go in... particularly into the RHU to try to secure it. At that point, it was really smoke-filled corridors. It was extremely difficult getting around the complex. That was our initial assignment.

McNaughton: The RHU was in Group 1.

Sprenkle: That was in Group 1. Correct.

McNaughton: The night before the rioting was contained to Groups 2 and 3.

Sprenkle: [Yes.] 2 and 3.

McNaughton: When you got there that second night, the inmates had already busted through into the Group 1 area?

Sprenkle: They had. There were fires and a lot of smoke, and we were concerned... in the RHU... about the inmates that actually couldn't get out of their cells at that point. We were afraid that they would be significantly overcome by smoke and potentially even fire. We went in, and it was our job to try to get the inmates out that were confined in there and to try to control the inmates that were running freely on the ranges.

McNaughton: Did you move the RHU inmates who were confined out into another area?

Sprenkle: Yeah, we moved them into the rear stockade.

McNaughton: Then what happened after that?

Sprenkle: Then it was just a matter of waiting for the state police tactical team to subdue the inmates. Once they were subdued, we moved all of the inmates out into the stockade and kept them there until we were ready to move them back in. That was a very tedious process, because there was so much property damage. There were like 14 buildings that were significantly damaged. Prior to moving the inmates in, we were part of the team that went through and searched for weapons and other sorts of contraband. We knew there had to be a lot of weapons around, because of the number of tools that were missing. We went from housing unit to housing unit and basically rid them of all the belongings.

McNaughton: Right. I did interview some people who said everybody cleaned the cells, dumped the stuff over the tier rails into the center, and a Bobcat came and pushed everything out into dumpsters.

Sprenkle: Yeah. Exactly. It really wasn't an issue of going through inmate items looking for contraband. It was really just a process of cleaning out the whole unit of all content... mattresses... everything. We would throw it into the middle of the range and then a Bobcat would come through and just push it out the rear.

McNaughton: Then... now we did kind of skip over the whole assault and taking back of the facility. Did you see that? Did you participate in any of that?

Sprenkle: We participated as back up to the state police. It was primarily a state police tactical team that did the initial sweep, and we were more in the background providing some cover for them. There was a barricade that was in place that the inmates constructed between Group 2 and 1, and we were on the Group 1 side and the inmates were on the Group 2 side. That's where we basically stayed until the tactical team was able to come in and move beyond that barricade.

McNaughton: I talked to a number of people who were in that same area, and they said, during the time of just waiting that the inmates were... from E Block... were throwing Molotov cocktails and all kinds of tools and weapons.

Sprenkle: Yeah, they were. They certainly were trying to instigate... they certainly wanted us to come forward. We were... people were trained at least well enough to maintain some control. We stayed there and held them in place until the state police tactical team arrived.

McNaughton: Somebody did mention to me that, back then, the emergency plan was the state police resolve the situation.

Sprenkle: That's correct. Up until that point the agreement was that the state police would be the responding authority. We really weren't integrated well with the state police at that time.

McNaughton: And boy did they respond, because I think I read in my recent research that about 800 state police officers/troopers reported to the institution.

Sprenkle: Yeah. It really was an incredible number of state police who responded.

McNaughton: Right. And also, our own staff from a number of our institutions as well.

Sprenkle: That's right. We brought in our teams from all across the state, and they provided wonderful assistance, particularly for the state police.

McNaughton: Let's fast forward again to the part where we cleaned out the inmate cells. You played a role in that. What was next for you?

Sprenkle: Once the institution was under control, it was really a priority to get the facility cleaned. Once we got the housing units cleared out and got the inmates back into the housing units, then it was time to clean up the damage. We were fortunate, at the time, that we had a basic training class... I believe it was Class #413... we used the students to assist the Camp Hill staff in cleaning up. They provided a wonderful service that was very, very critical. The cleanup was massive.

McNaughton: I want to ask you real quick about those poor trainees. What a way to enter your career... to see the worst that inmates can do. Of course, your career continued many years after that. Have you run into any of those trainees since then and talked about their beginning?

Sprenkle: I can't say that I ran into them afterward, but certainly we had a lot of discussions with the trainees while they were still in training. It was really... it was an unbelievable experience for them. It's certainly was not one that you would hope to see, but the actual hands-on [training] really complemented the classroom instruction that they received. In many ways it was a good experience in spite of the disaster... the destruction.

McNaughton: We know, as a result of the riot, yes, there were some people who were injured... severely injured... but there were some good things that came out of the riot. Can you talk to us about how the riot changed our system and in what ways?

Sprenkle: It was *THE* most significant event that really positively impacted the DOC, particularly in the area of staff training and emergency preparedness. Prior to the Camp Hill riot, training... it was ok, but it certainly wasn't updated to the point where we were being well trained and the staff were being well trained to handle large disturbances. Our equipment was seriously outdated. Basically, at that point prior to the Camp Hill riot, our tactical equipment

consisted of old tactical equipment that we got from state surplus. A lot of it came from the PA State Police. While we had individual CERT teams, the training was very limited to fundamental movements... crowd control... those sort of things. We really didn't have a well-coordinated emergency preparedness system in place. It was just a matter of getting key staff together and brainstorming and making certain that we got the proper decision-making from the executive staff. After the riot, we coordinated much better with other agencies, including the state police... including PEMA and others. I think, in my opinion, it took us from really behind the eight ball to a leader in staff training and emergency preparedness.

McNaughton: Let's talk about the specialty teams that came out of the riot. The system had CERT teams, and somebody said that the training really wasn't comprehensive enough. Can you talk to me about how that was enhanced and then all the different specialty teams that came out of it and how those specialty teams made us less reliant on others to come to our aid?

Sprenkle: Prior to the Camp Hill riot, we were dependent on the state police to respond to emergencies. The training prior to that was just a matter of crowd control, basic baton techniques, some fundamental firearms training. After the Camp Hill riot, we started over again in terms of the format of the training. It was very tactical. It was very well organized. In addition to the better training, we were able to procure more up-to-date equipment, including firearms and restraining devices. We knew that we needed to specialize in some areas. We developed our specialize teams, including the hostage rescue teams, the hostage negotiating teams and our rifle teams. We were able... again because we had the resources at that point to do it... we were able to work with some leading agencies and organizations in the country to help make all that happen.

McNaughton: Very impressive. I've been to several demonstrations of different teams – corrections rifle specialist teams... very interesting watching them hit a target from far away. They certainly are not-notch and I think another thing too that goes with the special teams is the fact that there's mandatory training requirements to help keep them fresh. Also, we're always looking for the best equipment to help them. Technology changes, so obviously we have to keep up on that.

Sprenkle: Correct.

McNaughton: It started 30 years ago, but it is still continuing even today. Somebody did mention that the creation of the different specialty teams was a huge morale booster for, not only SCI Camp Hill, but the entire DOC... especially immediately after the riot.

Sprenkle: It really was. It was an incredible difference once we made a full commitment to redesign our staff training and specifically the emergency preparedness aspects of the DOC. It was a huge morale boost. It gave staff the confidence that they needed at that point, knowing now that if in fact we had another Camp Hill riot, the process or the response would be very, very different.

McNaughton: Right. Excellent. What other things do you recall that you'd like to share?

Sprenkle: I think the important thing is the impact that it had on the DOC. That's what we've been spending some time here talking about. It was... in spite of all the damage and injuries, it really did create a landmark for the DOC in terms of really turning around the agency... staff training, emergency preparedness... overall staff morale was a huge boost. It really opened eyes and taught lessons.

McNaughton: I do remember for a good while after the riot, when people would talk about things, they would always use this phrase, "That was before the riot," or "since the riot." It really was that one pivotal point in our corrections history.

Sprenkle: It really was. One of the things I recall is right after the Camp Hill riot, when we decided to totally redo what we were doing, we became DOC PROUD, and that was a slogan that we used throughout the years probably up to this date.

McNaughton: So that came really from the riot?

Sprenkle: That really came from the riot.

McNaughton: Wow. Isn't that cool? I will use that hashtag in my project -- #DOCPROUD. That's another thing, too, that I think we learned over the years... when you have a good period of quiet time... and by that I mean when you don't have major incidents... people become lax... they forget what happened and they are stuck in their day-to-day stuff and they start kind of nit picking with each other... like security vs. treatment. When you finally do have a huge situation like this, it pulls you together. We have such a group of dedicated, loyal and skilled staff that they come together despite their differences and just get done what needs to be done.

Sprenkle: Exactly. They really do. That's one of the values of good staff training. Corrections is the type of work where complacency is always our enemy. While we don't want real emergencies, we do require that we run complacency drills. It's important that all of us remind ourselves of the potential consequences and make certain that we know just what to do in those circumstances. The other thing it really does... it brings us all together. It really doesn't matter if you're in food service or if you're in medical or if you're in whatever department of the DOC... when there's an emergency, we all have a very, very vital role to play. We just need to constantly make certain that we are on the top of our game.

McNaughton: Did you have anything else you wanted to share?

Sprenkle: No, Sue. That's about it. It's been a long time since I thought about the Camp Hill riot.

McNaughton: Ok. I've talked to a lot of people and some have said that they have never talked about it as much as they have with these recent interviews that I've been doing. A lot of them said it was very cathartic for them. I hope... the last thing that I want to do with these interviews is retraumatize anybody, but this agency has not been very good at collecting its history, and I'm getting ready to retire. I thought, "This is stuff we need to capture and send over to state archives for future generations."

Sprenkle: Sue, I am so glad you⁸ are doing this. This is a wonderful thing to do. It really is. In spite of the fact that it may open some wounds, the process is certainly very, very valuable. We can't forget about the Camp Hill riot. That's always a fear of ours, and I don't know how many people in the Department of Corrections today were there at the time of the Camp Hill riot, but my guess is it's not a large percentage of the total workforce.

McNaughton: You're right, and another thing that I noticed while talking to the 30 some people that I've interviewed is that a lot of them still choke up about it. They have their own reasons for that. Some feel guilty because it was their day off and they weren't there. Others were hostages. It's just amazing how, even though we're going on 30 years, it's very vivid to everybody.

Sprenkle: Yeah. That's for sure.

McNaughton: Bill, I want to thank you for participating in this project. I really appreciate it.

Sprenkle: You're more than welcome, Sue.

McNaughton: Take care. Bye bye.

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