

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: David Rudon
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 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 27, 2019, is Dave Rudon. Thank you for joining us.

Rudon: It's nice to be here, Susan.

McNaughton: Before we begin can you please provide us with your DOC employment history?

Rudon: I started in 1984 as a corrections officer trainee, after working four years at Northumberland County Prison. I went to the Academy, and started as a corrections officer trainee at Camp Hill. Just prior to the riot I was accepted at the DOC Training Academy, which at that time was located on Utley Drive [in Camp Hill], for skill sets that I had that were needed at the department at that time. I was promoted to sergeant. After the academy moved to Elizabethtown, they opened SCI Coal Township, and in 1993, I left the academy, took my commission and went to SCI Coal [Township], where I was a lieutenant and opened the RHU there.

McNaughton: Talk to me about what your day was like on October 25, 1989.

Rudon: Well, I'll give you a little preview before that. On the 23rd my wife told me that we were going to have a child, and on the 25th I was in the captain's office as the building was burning down around me and thought, "I'm never going to find out whether it was a boy or a girl."

McNaughton: Where was the captain's office at the time?

Rudon: It was over in Group 1... straight down the main walkway and then on your right... you had a couple of cell blocks behind there and the Group 1 dining hall.



David Rudon

McNaughton: What were you doing over there at the time?

Rudon: We were trying to get records and I had a list of things that we were trying to get out of there. When we went in, everything was fine. Once we got in...

McNaughton: So around 3 o'clock on October 25, that's about when the riot started, and you were in there...

Rudon: No, I didn't get there until about 5:30/6 o'clock.

McNaughton: It was about three hours into the rioting, and you went into the Captain's office to rescue records?

Rudon: Yes.

McNaughton: Back to that evening on October 25... what do you remember seeing?

Rudon: Chaos. Fire. Smoke. Places where I had lunch every day just burning.

McNaughton: I don't know why, but I thought most of the stuff on the first night happened in Group 2 and 3 areas?

Rudon: Yes.

McNaughton: Is that where you ate your lunch everyday?

Rudon: Well, I was assigned F Block over there.

McNaughton: F Block is where Tabb Bickell was.

Rudon: Yes. We were woefully ill prepared for a riot of that magnitude. I remember walking around with a bomb disposal vest on. It was like three days until I got home... until I got out of there. So, I'm trying to remember all of the things in chronological order. I spent the last 30 years trying to forget all of that. Now I'm trying to bring it back.

McNaughton: A couple hours into the riot, you're in the captain's office area taking records [of the institution]. Why are you taking records out of there?

Rudon: Because I was ordered to.

McNaughton: Was the place on fire?

Rudon: Not to the degree it was when I left.

McNaughton: OK. But they knew they ... the administration ... knew they had to get records out of there. Then you accomplished what you were sent in to do?

Rudon: Yes.

McNaughton: Then where did you go?

Rudon: After that, we were outfitted with whatever they had laying around as far as what they called emergency equipment at the time.

McNaughton: I'm hearing that that really wasn't very sophisticated equipment or even really enough.

Rudon: No. It wasn't. I remember, the second night we were in echelon and one guy would have a shotgun, one guy would have a bomb disposal vest, one guy would have a helmet, one guy would have a baton.

McNaughton: They spread it out.

Rudon: Yeah, and then the other guy would have the ammunition for the gun. [he's joking a bit here.]

McNaughton: Everybody had a piece of the puzzle. What was going on at E Gate at this time, the first night? Because E Gate was the central kicking-off point.

Rudon: That's where everything happened with... with sarge. That's where the whole thing started, and it just blew up from there.

McNaughton: As you're walking on that roadway between E Block and the Education Building, how was the reception for you from the inmates? What kind of reception were you getting? How were you being greeted?

Rudon: With things coming through the air.

McNaughton: Rocks? Bricks?

Rudon: Rocks. Whatever they could get their hands on. I remember the second night when they got into the construction cluster, they were up on the roofs of the housing units, and we were standing there in an echelon line, when I heard something whizzing through the air. It was a circular saw blade that I got hit with in the leg and didn't realize... I had no feeling from the knee down in the leg due to a prior injury. I remember trying to get the jumpsuit off, and it was burned, and it smelled really bad, and I was trying to get it off and it was stuck to me. I couldn't figure out why it was stuck, and the blood had... I didn't even realize that I was hit.

McNaughton: Oh my. So, all of the tools that nowadays would never be allowed inside the institution, were inside the institution. Where were they held inside the institution before the inmates got them?

Rudon: In the construction cluster which was back behind the chapel. They had acetylene torches... chainsaws. Everything that was in there... drills. They were using the circular sawblades like Frisbees.

McNaughton: Were you standing on the one side of the fence with everybody else just watching what the inmates were doing on the other side... trying to reinforce that line so they weren't coming through that?

Rudon: Correct.

McNaughton: And that went on for hours and hours?

Rudon: Yes. Hours and hours.

McNaughton: When did it finally come to an end for that night and how?

Rudon: I don't remember the mechanics behind what ended it the first night. What I do remember from the first night was the superintendent saying, "We're secure. Everything is good." And all of the locking mechanisms on the Van Doren System were broken, and at that time realized that our locksmiths were inmates. So, we sent everybody home, and then they said, "No. Just reach your hand up... over a little bit... yep, right there... push up," and the cells just all came opened. It was... on like Christmas lights.

McNaughton: So, you went home the first night?

Rudon: No.

McNaughton: It ended about 11:30-ish the first night.

Rudon: Yes.

McNaughton: And you just rolled right into the next shift.

Rudon: Yes. It just went on.

McNaughton: The inmates were locked down... I'm using air quotes... and they were trying to feed the inmates... providing them with medical care after they stuffed them into all the different cells. Right?

Rudon: Yes.

McNaughton: And then at some point the inmates were supposed to meet with the superintendent on the 26th, and I think they had that meeting, but then something made them mad and they took over the prison again after that. Was it something the superintendent said during one of the briefings that they happened to watch on TV, or what was it that made them start up again?

Rudon: I am not really sure. While I was trying to think of where I was... we were busy when they were doing that. I remember much more of the second night than I do of the first night, because the second night was...

McNaughton: Ok, so where were you on the second night?

Rudon: I remember the first night. I remember Ron Klock, who was on G Block, he was taken hostage. You realize when you're doing this job that this is part of it. This is...

McNaughton: ... possibly something that could happen.

Rudon: Right. You prepare for it, but you never expect it. I always wondered to myself, "How would I react to this?" I remember when I first came on as a trainee, a sergeant saying, "You want to watch who you hang with, because that guy over there... if things break bad, he's going to leave you to..." He was pointing out who I should be with. When the sh*t hit the fan, all of

the people he said would run, stuck by me; and all the people he said would stick by me, they ran like...

McNaughton: Roaches.

Rudon: Yeah. I remember the next morning, at daylight, they were trying to feed us. The first night was kind of... you were so tired, you don't remember anything... you were just moving. You were just... but I remember seeing Ron Klock coming across the walk from Group 1 to Group 2 and 3 with a cigar in his mouth. I looked at him... this guy was taken hostage. They took his ring. They took pictures of his wife and his children and they got his wallet... and they held him for hours... threatening his life. And there it was the next morning and here comes Ron walking across and I said, "What are you doing?" He said, "Going to work." ... like it was...

McNaughton: Wow.

Rudon: Yeah, that's something that I won't ever forget. And then because of what I was doing at the Academy, we did not have sufficient weapons to secure the perimeter, and I'm not sure whether it was the Maryland State Police or the Maryland Department of Corrections... sent us a ton of guns to secure our perimeter with...

McNaughton: In addition to all the local police and state police that showed up?

Rudon: Yeah. It was... I remember... I'm trying to think of his name... These are all things that I blocked out. Major of the state police...

McNaughton: Hazen?

Rudon: Exactly. We were standing in echelon and had really nothing to fight back with, and the inmates were on the roofs and they had broken into the Group 2 and 3 kitchen, and they were throwing full #10 cans at us. Yeah, they hurt. Major Hazen was right behind me, and I said, "Major, can you tell me why we're standing here like targets?" I remember Hazen getting on the radio... there were helicopters flying over the jail, and he said, "Get them off the roof." The next thing... out of nowhere, this helicopter came, and I just saw inmates diving off the roofs... I thanked him profusely, because that sort of stopped the siege on the echelon, when we were getting beat up.

McNaughton: Wow. It was in the reports that Freeman [the superintendent] never went inside that institution, and we know that there were communications problems between the two deputies, they didn't get along, and...

Rudon: One of the problems was... here we are we've got 10 news crews and they're saying, "We're going to do this, we're ..." It was like... the inmates all have televisions. The inmates are all watching this. You're giving away the game plan...

McNaughton: They actually showed a map of how the state police were going to try to enter the institution, and our press secretary was calling them screaming at them on the phone, "Stop showing that map."

Rudon: The other thing... we had two separate entities that were trying to run the show. We had our people... who didn't have a clue what was going on; and we had the state police that had half a clue what was going on. Me and Bill Ward... we were tasked with... we didn't have count... this was Thursday or Friday, and we still didn't have a count. Bill Ward and I were tasked with clearing the steam tunnels from Group 2 to Group 1. We went in at the kitchen... the kitchen is burnt... it's cinders... and you go down steps and you're in the steam tunnels. I'm walking down the steps and I get to the first landing, and I hear something down below. I hear a crunch... like a foot turning on broken... and my heart started pounding. I can't hear anything but my pulse in my ears. I turned around and I looked at Bill, and I could tell by the look in his eye that he heard it too. We're both armed. I take another step down... I've got one foot on the landing and one on the step, and I hear somebody moving there. I came around the corner and brought my weapon up, and there's a guy standing there. As I brought my weapon up, his weapon came up. The state police were coming through this way... we're going through this way... and neither one of us knew.

McNaughton: Oh my gosh.

Rudon: We both went... the only thing... the only saving grace that I didn't feel like a fool, was me and that statie had the same look on our faces. He got on his radio and, expletives deleted, he said, "Somebody better get this show coordinated."

McNaughton: Wow. You could have both taken each other out.

Rudon: Yeah... two casualties and it was two cops shooting each other.

McNaughton: Thom Rogosky talked about the fact that... I think it was Thom... that there were rumors that count was off by an inmate and they thought an inmate was running through the tunnels. I guess after they were cleared – and you must have been part of that process – they had the fire department bring in 55-gallon drums of water that they put on top of the manholes in case somebody was in there, so they'd be trapped. Everybody I talked to says they accounted for everybody. Nobody died. Yeah, people were shot, but nobody died.

Rudon: God, there's so much stuff coming back, and some of it's funny and some of it's so horrible. Owens tasked us with... when we had "control" of the jail... you know, it's getting late in the season... it's getting cold out at night and he wants these inmates back in cells as quick as possible, and he doesn't want any of their property destroyed. We're looking... it looked like Hiroshima after the bomb... and we had a limited amount of time to get these people in before the weather broke really bad. I called Kenny Mumma and said, "Send me a torch, a Bobcat and a 10-wheeler up to K Block." We cut the center posts out and I had officers... I had cadets from the Academy. I said, "Everything in those cells just toss it over... right on the floor." Then we came in with Bobcats, loaded up and...

McNaughton: But that's the way you had to clean it up because everything was a mess. There was no accounting who had what.

Rudon: Right, and not only did you have inmates against staff, you also had inmates against inmates. They were in other people's cells throwing stuff. We couldn't go through and identify

[whose property was whose]. Take the posts off, go in with a Bobcat... Mike Leidy was with me, and he said, "You realize we could get fired for this, right?" I said, "Yeah."

I remember driving with the perimeter vehicle passing shotguns out and seeing all of these inmates kneeling at the fence... the whole perimeter... with signs around their neck saying they weren't involved. When people see a riot they think, "Those inmates," and not realizing there's a handful of inmates that did this... there's not 2,000 inmates involved in this... there's 300 inmates involved in this. ... The majority of them wanted no parts of this.

McNaughton: Yeah, and they sat in the yards, right?

Rudon: Yeah. They went out there and they had pieces of cardboard and whatever they could use as a marker. And they were kneeling there with their hands behind their back looking at the cops saying they weren't involved. I'm going to need to take something to get to sleep tonight.

McNaughton: Oh, no.

Rudon: I remember when they had... the inmates got 4x8 sheets of paneling out of the construction cluster and they were making barricades. I remember the fire trucks just blasting them, and watching guys just go flying. I remember things... that I heard afterward... friends of mine that lived like in Millersburg saying that you could see the jail burning from across the river.

I remember I had been up for like 72 hours, and me and JD Shutt got there at about the same time on the second day, and when we were finally leaving, he went out -- when he pulled in and jumped out of the car and forgot to turn his lights off -- and his battery was dead... he left his lights on when he got there... I had to jump his car so he could get home.

McNaughton: People also talk about the fact that [employee] morale was really bad before. Do you remember that?

Rudon: We had found a number of glaring problems, and talked to our superiors who had gone and said, "We've got to fix these things." This is what really p*ssed us off... that they were looking at like a half a million dollars renovations to fix things that were absolutely blatant in the riot. ... They didn't have the money to fix it, but we had \$200 million to redo everything after all my friends got hurt. Nobody died, and... but there's things worse than death. I know people to this day, that from the 25th until now, lived in fear every day. Their life was over that night. They didn't die, but their life was over.

McNaughton: How were you able to ... at the time, get through it and go back in? Even after that... even continue working in corrections? It sounds like it really affected you. Why, what kept you going?

Rudon: It affects me more now than it did then. I had just found out I was going to be a father, and I thought, "There's no way I'm dying in this jail; and there's no way... whatever it took."

McNaughton: In some cases, people say they don't know how they just did what they had to do.

Rudon: Yeah. You hear all this stuff and talk about heroes... I knew what I was getting into. I was a correctional officer at the county before I came to the state. The county is worse, because they're all jitterbugs, you don't know anything about them. By the time we get them, you know who their grade school teacher was. I've been in a lot of situations. We were woefully understaffed at the county. There [at Camp Hill], I had a lot of faith with the people I worked with. I knew that together... I knew... there's never been a riot where the inmates won... ever... in the history of corrections. We will always win, and I knew... that I was going to make it out no matter what it took. You don't get scared until after.

McNaughton: When you realize what you've been through.

Rudon: Yeah.

McNaughton: The fact that the cells were not secured that first night.

Rudon: We knew that, and we tried to tell them that. It's like... We were more... we were more concerned about our public image than our officers. They said, "We have everything under control." We said, "No you don't... you don't have anything under control." They said, "The jail is secured."

McNaughton: But the inmates were running around on the tiers... the officers could see them.

Rudon: Then we're running around with chains and padlocks trying to close the doors.

McNaughton: It's maddening. Isn't it? You... I can feel it.

Rudon: Sue, I loved my job. If it wasn't for my health, I'd still be there.

McNaughton: Looking back, you'd do it all again?

Rudon: Absolutely.

END