

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Denise Shade
Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots**
Interview Date: September 4, 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 4, 2019, is Denise Shade. Thank you for joining us, Denise.

Shade: Hi, Sue.

McNaughton: Before we begin, Denise, can you provide us with a brief overview of your DOC career?

Shade: I worked at the State Correctional Institution at Camp Hill for 35 years from 1980 to 2015. I worked in the inmate employment office. I worked in the inmate accounting office, the mailroom and then I ended my career in the inmate accounting office as an accounting assistant in 2015.

McNaughton: Great. Let's get to the riot. Tell us what you remember and where were you on Wednesday, October 25, 1989?

Shade: I, at that time, was the mailroom supervisor. At that time the mailroom had several inmate clerks that worked along with the civilians. When the riot started to happen, they made me keep my three inmates with me, because they didn't want them to go back inside because they knew at that point they weren't involved with the actual riot. So, that Wednesday night we were out in the administration building until about 11 o'clock that evening, when they actually took my three guys back inside once they felt the riot was over and everyone was secure.



Denise Shade

During that day the state police were there. The mailroom was a really large room in the administration building, so the state police kind of took over our mailroom as their point of contact. Then around 11 o'clock that night, after our inmates went back inside, I came home.

McNaughton: Tell me what your view was like. You're in the administration building, outside of the perimeter but near the main gate. What could you see that first afternoon into the evening and late into the night?



Denise looks out her office window watching the riot.

Shade: We could see out our windows and see across what used to be the visiting room and out on the main walkway. One thing I do remember [seeing] was a bunch of corrections officers running from where the riot had kicked off over by the gym area back to Group 1. I remember that pretty well. I remember that we would... the state police were there... a lot of activity and just listening to the radios and the communications between all of the members that were there... all of the CERT teams coming in in the back parking lot... all in their riot gear. I remember that really well. We spent most of our time in the administration building.

McNaughton: Obviously, when the riot started, pretty much everything came to a screeching halt for inmate mail, right? What kind of work were you doing or were you supporting others? Were you supporting the state police, or were you just on hand in case. What were you doing?

Shade: After Wednesday... on Thursday morning, they tried to get business back as usual. I remember doing the mail run inside with the staff mail. They did shut down the... we had a post office box number, and they stopped all the mail at the post office. We spent a lot of time running errands. I remember I had to go to Cumberland County Prison to get flex cuffs, because they had run out. I actually drove up to Carlisle to get them. We were driving some of the CERT

team members, who had been there for a really long time, to local hotels.... we made coffee and did whatever we could to help the state police.

McNaughton: I saw some pictures of the mailroom and was able to identify you and I saw in those pictures that there were state police helicopter pilots. Was that the area where they rested in between flights?

Shade: Yes. That's where they all hung out. I guess they could only fly for so long and then they had rotating shifts in the helicopter, but yes, they were pretty much up there during that time.

McNaughton: Back to the riot, the next day, which was Thursday, you said it was trying to get things back to normal because we presumed everything was back to normal, how long did you work and then when did you come back because the second night kicked off again?

Shade: I worked my normal shift until 4:30 and then I was over in the Harrisburg area. I was coming home on I-83, probably about 6 o'clock, maybe 7... and about six state police troopers just flew by me lights blazing, and all I could think of was, "Oh, my heavens." So, I don't know why, but I went right back to the jail. At that point the state police were coming in.

The administration building was locked, because I was the first one that got back to the admin building, and I will never forget... there was a male guy coming around the admin building and he was in inmate brown clothing, and I thought, "Oh, my God. There's an inmate out here. What am I going to do with him?" Once he got closer to me, I realized it was actually one of the corrections officers. I'm pretty sure his first name was Ernie... that the inmates had dressed in inmate clothing to get him out of the main gate ... to get him out to safety. So, I opened up the admin building, and we went inside and sat and waited for everyone to come back to work.

McNaughton: Did he say anything to you? Did he tell you what he had gone through?

Shade: Just a little bit, yes. Because when I first looked at him... we had known each other, and he had said who he was... I was like, "Oh my gosh, are you ok?" He was obviously shook up. Then as people started coming back in, security staff took him and debriefed him. Then the state police started coming back. The CERT teams were coming back. That Thursday night, a lot of us were there all night long. It was almost like... the fires were so intense. And we walked down the parking lot up to Central Office, and you could just see all of the fires. They had put boards and wood up against the fence, so you really couldn't see in very well of what they were doing. That night was... was very crazy. It almost felt like you were watching a movie. I can't explain it. It was like ... this can't really be happening. We stayed, and the state police were up there, and I think it was around 2 in the morning, maybe... I could be wrong... but they finally gave out the word that they had gotten all of the hostages out because that night... several of the corrections officers were being held as hostages in cell blocks. Then the next morning, I came home.

McNaughton: During that Thursday night into Friday, there were prison staff trapped inside as well, right?

Shade: Yes. I know the corrections officers were, and I know... I don't remember the timeframe... I know there was a period of time where several of the management team were up above the control desk... that were trapped in there... that when the second riot kicked off they had to get them out of a window and down a ladder. That was all happening inside, and we weren't inside.



The area from which staff had to be rescued.

McNaughton: Did you ever have... once it was all over ... did you ever have a debriefing, and did what you witnessed impact you at all... did you have nightmares?

Shade: I remember, we had group debriefings with four or five or six people in a group. I don't personally remember being debriefed one-on-one. I don't remember that. I do remember the group discussion.

As for having nightmares or anything like that... no. I did not, fortunately. But after it was all over, my husband was like, "Why did you stay there?" He didn't question me while I was doing it, but later he was like, "Why did you stay there? They could have gotten through that fence... you could have been in real trouble." I'm like, "I don't know. I just felt like I had to be there to help do whatever I could help to do."

I knew at that point that I would probably never going to work back inside the fence again, because... it just... that part freaked me out. I don't think... in the very beginning... not that they took is seriously or not, but some of my friends that worked inside in the inmate accounting

office... they were still working and had no idea what was happening on the other side of the jail until I called them. I was like, "Get out. Get out." They said, "We'll just stay here. We're safer here." I was like, "Man, I don't know."

McNaughton: A lot of people that I talked to explained it as just chaotic.

Shade: Yes. That's a good word.

McNaughton: Is there anything else that you want to mention that we may have forgotten?

Shade: The biggest memory I have is of Ernie in the brown inmate uniform... the fires that second night were just amazing. The state police being at the jail... they were at the jail for a whole year afterward in the admin building hanging out... just in case something happened.

McNaughton: It must have felt odd when they were finally allowed to leave.

Shade: Yes. After a while it was like... this is really a big waste of money. Because those guys were making *bucks*. It was ... I don't know... there were a lot of changes that happened after that. We had mail backed up for, gosh, I don't even know how long. It sat at the Camp Hill Post Office, and we had to then try to get through it. It was kind of crazy.

McNaughton: Plus, they shipped out 800 inmates, so there might have been mail for them... did you have to forward that to them whenever you finally figured out where they were?

Shade: Yes. The problem was that a lot of them went up to the federal prison in Lewisburg, Pa., initially, but then they were sent all over the country. I know one of my mail runners, he ended up out in Arizona. Of the three guys, one stayed and the other two were shipped out into the federal system.

McNaughton: Amazing.

Shade: Yeah, it was. It truly was, and that's the first thing... when I tell people where I worked, they ask, "Were you there during the riots?" That's the first thing they say.

McNaughton: Everybody seems to remember that and where they were when it happened. Some people watched it from the back side of the mall on the back side of the institution.

Shade: Jim [her husband] did. He and his buddy, Dan... the second night when I told him where I was and what was happening, they went exactly... over behind the strip mall.

McNaughton: I think that's it. If you have anything else you want to share, please let me know, and I thank you for participating in our project.

Shade: Ok. Sure. Take care

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