

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: John Palakovich
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 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 John Palakovich. Thank you for joining us, John.

Palakovich: Thank you. Glad to be here.

McNaughton: Before we get started, would you please provide us with your DOC employment history?

Palakovich: I began my career with the Department of Corrections in 1976 at the State Correctional Institution at Camp Hill. I worked as a vocational evaluator, inmate employment officer, superintendent's assistant, deputy superintendent for treatment, deputy superintendent for operations and superintendent at SCI Smithfield and then returned to SCI Camp Hill as superintendent. I retired in April 2010.

McNaughton: Thank you. Again, this is about the memories of the Camp Hill prison riot. I've interviewed a number of different people, from other superintendents somewhere else in the system, hostages, general employees who were working inside and outside of the institution at the time. But you were kind of a special employee, because, in addition to being the superintendent's assistant, you also were the public information officer. I want to hear about all aspects of your job. Let's start with it's about 2:30 [p.m.] on Wednesday, October 25, 1989. Where are you and what's happening?



John Palakovich

Palakovich: I was underneath one of the cell blocks... it was C Block at the time ... working with Deputy Attorney General Francis Filipi. We had a major asbestos abatement lawsuit going on at the time, and we heard the call for general lockdown and determined that there was a problem. I escorted Francis out of the institution and went back to the main command post.

McNaughton: And that command post was in the superintendent's office in the prison's administration building?

Palakovich: No. the command post at that point was inside at the deputy superintendents' office beside the control center in Group 1.

McNaughton: What happened after you got there?

Palakovich: When we got there, we had a view of where the incident occurred at E Gate, and we could tell it was a major disturbance. I was in the office there for about an hour or so before I was able to get outside the institution back to the superintendent's office. I knew we would be flooded with a number of press calls coming in from the incident.

McNaughton: When you went back out to the administration building, sure enough, you had press calls waiting I'm sure.

Palakovich: I had numerous press calls. Yes. I was getting calls from anyone and everyone... regarding what was going on. We set up an initial briefing probably shortly before 6 p.m., and of course all of the local media were there. We had the briefing across Lisburn Road near the abattoir.

McNaughton: As the incident continued, what was one of the main things you learned with respect to the placement of your media briefing area during an incident?



The triage area outside of the prison.

Palakovich: First, it was too close to the center of what was going on... to the institution. Again, hindsight is twenty-twenty, as we all learned from the riot. The briefing area was too close to incoming personnel, police and other emergency people coming into the institution. It created a problem, because media at that point had direct visual line of sight of what was going on inside the institution.

McNaughton: And, also, immediately right outside the institution, there was all of the first responders and EMS were triaging injured individuals.

Palakovich: That's correct. The triage area was immediate outside the administration building, and it was not a good situation.

McNaughton: As the night continued and you've given your first briefing, when was your second briefing and by that time, how many reporters do you think were there?

Palakovich: there had to be at least 50. The second briefing was probably around 8 p.m., and after I initially did the first briefing, I remember going back to the office, and I was getting calls from the major networks... ABC, CBS, NBC... and they were asking me if they should send a crew to the institution.

McNaughton: What did you say?

Palakovich: I said, "I cannot answer that." [Laughter]

McNaughton: While you were the PIO at the facility, you also have a press secretary at the DOC level that you had to answer to. What was your interaction then with Press Secretary Ken Robinson? How did you communicate with each other... did you come up and meet with him? How did that work for you?

Palakovich: We were initially communicating by phone. At some point that evening he came down to the institution and we were in constant communication from then on out.

McNaughton: Tell me about how the first night ended and any media briefings explaining that process. How did it end? What had been promised to the inmates for the next day, if anything?

Palakovich: The first night ended, basically, with the agreement that the superintendent would meet with inmate representatives the next day. We had a briefing in the middle of the night... pre-dawn... saying that the issue was settled at that point. The superintendent was going to meet with the inmates, and we had the briefing.

McNaughton: So, was the facility secured at that time?

Palakovich: Well, again, hindsight is twenty-twenty. The assumption was that it was secured, but obviously it was not.

McNaughton: I talked to a lot of people who talked about going in and securing the inmates into the cells, and then things were pretty much quiet? The inmates were fed...

Palakovich: It was quiet the next day. As I recall, the superintendent was preparing for a conference call with the governor's office in the early afternoon. The assumption was that the inmates were in their cells. The investigation showed later that the panel boxes were available to the inmates from their cells... they could open them manually. Generally during the day, it was tense. It was quiet the entire day. Superintendent and the two deputies met with the inmates. I wasn't in on that meeting, so I couldn't tell you what actually went on. We all went to Central Office in the early afternoon. We had a conference call with the governor.

McNaughton: Around 6/6:30 p.m., we're talking on October 26th... where were you, and what was happening?

Palakovich: I was in my office returning press calls. The superintendent had had a late afternoon press briefing that was aired on the 6 p.m. news, obviously.



Superintendent Robert Freeman at the end of the first day's rioting.

I finished the call with a Patriot-New reporter. I was going to go back inside the institution to see how things were before I went home, and I decided against it. I left the institution about 6:15 and got home, and I remember this vividly... I told my wife, "Don't take the phone off the hook." And I went to bed. She did take the phone off the hook. Two hours later, she put it back on, and immediately it was Ken Robinson telling me I had to come back to the institution.

McNaughton: When you were coming back toward the institution, what did you see? What was happening?

Palakovich: Camp Hill sits at the base of Slate Hill Road and Lisburn Road, and as I came across the top of the hill coming down toward the institution, it looked like an inferno. The entire institution was basically up in flames. It looked like napalm had hit. Obviously, there were more police there... more emergency personnel at the institution when I got there, and I went back into the office.

McNaughton: Then, of course, there were more media briefings and, talk to me about what was going on... were you in the command center then, were you with the superintendent?

Palakovich: Yes, the command center had been moved out to the superintendent's office. I was in the command center that night.

McNaughton: Lots of activity obviously. Talk to me about the way that officers were able to communicate with staff to let them know they were in trouble. I talked to other people who said that back then we didn't have radios like we have now. So, individuals who were trapped or who were about to be taken hostage were calling control asking for help?

Palakovich: That's correct. There weren't as many radios throughout the institution as we have today, and staff would be making calls into the command center telling us where their location was and requesting help.

McNaughton: That must have been awful to listen to.

Palakovich: It was awful, but probably the hardest part was when they brought the injured staff members out... many of them I knew very well. They were battered.

McNaughton: That second night, there were a number of staff who were trapped in the control area inside the institution and then above control. Can you talk to me about how many people, why were they there, and how they were rescued?

Palakovich: I believe there were 20 to 30 people in that immediate building... the control center building in Group 1. That houses the deputy superintendents' offices and treatment clinic offices... the counselors and psychologists... and records office was in that area. When the second night of the riot started, the inmates were able to come through the gate that separated where most of the action had taken place the first night, and they came right for the control center area. That's where all of the keys were located. That's where emergency equipment was located. The staff were initially downstairs... they got to the second floor of the building. They were basically surrounded by rioting inmates, and they had to wait for the state police to come in... and a fire company had a ladder and got them out a second-story window.

McNaughton: Wow. The accounts that I've read and heard from people that I interviewed, is that the inmates actually broke in through the air conditioning units that were in the windows, and they just set everything on fire, I guess, and the smoke, really, is what forced the staff to move up. Is that true?

Palakovich: Yes. That's true. They pushed the air conditioning units in through the windows and set fire to the first floor of the building.

McNaughton: And there were some inmates with that group of 20 to 30 people...

Palakovich: There were a few inmates with the staff, yes.

McNaughton: After they were rescued and they got those individuals out... that must have been an incredible sight to see. Did you actually see that happening?

Palakovich: No, I did not see that part. Like I said, I had gone home that evening, and I just missed it, or I would have been part of it myself.

McNaughton: Wow. Wow. They had been rescued by the time you showed up?

Palakovich: Yes. They were outside the institution when I showed up.

McNaughton: I wanted to go back to the fact that I had heard that you were trapped inside.

Palakovich: The first day I was basically trapped inside. I couldn't go anywhere... we were locked down. I wasn't... I guess you could consider that trapped, but I wasn't trapped. I wasn't in any harm's way at that point. I just could not get outside the institution.

McNaughton: I guess, from Ken Robinson trying to reach his PIO and he can't because you're stuck inside the institution, that must have been a little panicking for him.

Palakovich: Yeah.

McNaughton: I also recall that you had been up for a long amount of time before the riots started. Is that true? Why?

Palakovich: I normally would get into the office 6/6:30 in the morning. So, I was there the morning prior to the riot at 6:30 [a.m.] the first day. I stayed until roughly 4 or 5 o'clock the next morning of October 26. I went home, came back in the office by 7 p.m., and I was there until 6 p.m. on Thursday evening [October 27]. I went home and got my two hours of sleep. When I went to the institution on Thursday night... I got home on Saturday morning.

McNaughton: Talk to me about what it's like to handle media inquiries when you're tired, when you're concerned about the people inside that you know are being hurt, and how did that reveal itself? Do you remember?

Palakovich: During the time it was happening, I was running on adrenaline. I was able to just focus on what I was telling the media. The most frustrating part is with that number of media there, there's always somebody showing up late and missing the initial statement and the initial round of questions and they start asking the same questions over and over. Probably the highlight of it all was the second night of the riot, I had a press briefing outside, and somebody asked the question, "Are they trying to burn the place down." And, of course, the fires are burning behind me, and I just turned around looked at it... turned back to the press and said, "Obviously."

McNaughton: And then what happened? I think I recall the press secretary said, "I think we need to give John a break."

Palakovich: That's when he pulled me off [briefings].

McNaughton: So, we know that... all PIOs had back-up PIOs at that time too, so that was probably a good time to bring in your back-up, which is what I believed happened, and that was Ed Ulsh.

Palakovich: Ed Ulsh was my back-up PIO, correct.

McNaughton: And then, I think, over the late-night hours they brought him in to handle some media briefings as well. I remember him and our deputy [press secretary] Sherri Cadeaux at the time, were handling media.

Palakovich: They did do a media briefing that was like at 3 a.m. in the morning. I was there. I just wasn't doing the briefing. I remember that, and it was a crucial time in the negotiations to release the hostages. It was probably the worst time to put a back-up person in, but I was exhausted at that time, obviously.

McNaughton: The local media... even at 3 a.m., were they covering this live?

Palakovich: Yes, they were. There was local media there.

McNaughton: So, there you are, in the middle of critical negotiations... early, wee-morning hours...and your back-up is doing the briefings. Boy, that must have been nerve wracking. Not that Ed wasn't qualified, but did... wow, you had to be very cognizant of the fact that whatever information you released ... the inmates were listening to.

Palakovich: Exactly. It was a very tense time... very, very tense time. Today I still feel bad that we had to put Ed in that position, but it was just the way it worked out.

McNaughton: Then, the critical negotiations were going on. Tell me how that day ended and what was the rest of your day like?

Palakovich: The riot ended... I guess the state police went in about 6:30, a quarter to 7 in the morning and there were shots fired, and the inmates went back to their cells ... and that basically ended the riot. The remainder of the day... after that, I'm drawing blank right now as to what I did that day. I know I was at work. We were starting to find out who were the injured people. We had all of the hostages accounted for. Then we began the process of [deciding] what we were going to do with all of the inmates that were out in the exercise field.

McNaughton: Being the superintendent's assistant and also the PIO, were you able to actually do any superintendent assistant work, or were you all focused on PIO duties?

Palakovich: At that point it was all PIO duties, but at some point, I was in the command post more and more and the press briefings, as I recall, were eventually taken over by Ken Robinson, and central office was doing the major briefings after the riot concluded.

McNaughton: Tell me what happened then afterwards. How did we get inmates out and transferred out? What went into all of that?

Palakovich: The plan was to transfer the inmates to other institutions throughout the state initially. That was the first step, to get the inmates that were out of their cells into another institution. So, we had to physically go down on the field and identify inmates... put them on a bus. The buses... the first bus left Friday night probably close to midnight. There were like six buses going to Waymart... which was the first institution to receive inmates. They were escorted by state police. We were trying to identify inmates ... if you can imagine this... on a darkened field by flashlight and pictures.

McNaughton: Also, there was damage to the records office, so that also compounded the...

Palakovich: That hindered the operation too. Fortunately, all of the files weren't totally destroyed, but there were a number of files that were destroyed.

McNaughton: So, you identify the inmates as best you can. Maybe you know... you're just not sure that this person is who this person says he is.

Palakovich: Part of it was that I got sent down to the field to identify inmates, because I knew a lot of the inmates. I could identify them by myself. You call a name out and 10 guys say, "I just want to get out of here." We identified inmates, loaded the buses and got them out of there.

McNaughton: Talk about what... looking back... were the causes of the riot.

Palakovich: Causes of the riot were numerous. The biggest thing I would say was overcrowding. The institution was not built for that many inmates. It was designed for 1,300 inmates. We had close to 2,600 inmates I believe at the time. We had added additional housing units... dormitory units, etc., over time. We were understaffed. There was a lack of programming for the inmates, which was probably one of the biggest things... lack of jobs. Shortage of money to keep up routine maintenance.

One other factor... at that period of time, we were in a transition... Camp Hill was designed for juveniles as everybody knows. We transitioned to adults, and the type of offender we had at the time were becoming much more serious offenders. We had a lot of parole violators there that weren't happy and that aggravated the situation. Then there were a number of groups that were trying to create disturbances for us.

McNaughton: Right. But the Fruit Of Islam group played a pretty big role in that, I believe.

Palakovich: They were the center of it in reality, yes.

McNaughton: Other things that I heard... HIV/AIDS was relatively new back then and I think they were trying to mainstream some of the HIV/AIDS inmates into general population, and that caused a concern for the inmates in the population... not only there but at other facilities. Huntingdon had an issue a couple of days before the Camp Hill issue. I heard that was an issue.

Palakovich: I wouldn't totally put too much weight on that. We were dealing with HIV inmates since 1983... 1984... we did have a housing unit in our medical department for 10 to 12 of those guys, and we had put them out in population, and we didn't get a big reaction at Camp Hill. Some of the other institutions may have, yes.

McNaughton: I heard that there was a change in policy about sick line?

Palakovich: That was probably one of the biggest contributing factors. They wanted to change the policy from five days a week to three days a week for sick line. Again, that all factored in with the money being short at the time. The inmates were not happy about it. Right.

McNaughton: Then the Family Days.

Palakovich: Family Days was probably the biggest thorn under the inmates' saddle.

McNaughton: Can you explain to me, and the listeners, what was Family Day, and what was the problem with Family Day that it had to be stopped?

Palakovich: Family Day was a tradition throughout the Department of Corrections where once a year an inmate's family could come into the institution... basically bring a picnic-style lunch and spend the day outdoors at picnic tables... spending time with their family. The problem with it was obviously people bringing in food items ... that's a natural way to bring contraband in the institution. And, again, when you have 2,600 inmates versus the original 1,000 to 1,200 inmates, a different kind of inmate, culture... too many things were being brought into the institution. Staff were just unable to check what was being brought in. The superintendent at the time... we had announced that this was going to be the last year for Family Days, and inmates were not happy about that.

McNaughton: The stopping of Family Days, was that just specific to Camp Hill? You said it was a department-wide thing, did other institutions stop theirs?

Palakovich: I shouldn't say it was a department thing. It was a Camp Hill tradition. It goes back to the days of it being a juvenile facility.

McNaughton: Moving forward after the riot, Superintendent Freeman was then let go and was replaced by Jeff Beard. Tell me what that was like.

Palakovich: I will give the greatest credit to Jeff Beard. He was probably the one person that could get the institution moving. After the riot, the inmates were locked down. It was over a week and the inmates were still locked in their cells. When Jeff Beard came into the institution as superintendent, he said, "Why are we continuing to do this? We need to start loosening things up. We need to move forward." Staff was still in shock. Nobody wanted to do anything for the inmates. He started to get things moving in the institution. He basically was able to rebuild Camp Hill.

McNaughton: Talk about the physical rebuilding of Camp Hill. How was that facility rebuilt?

Palakovich: Basically, from the inside out. The first thing we did was remove all of the debris. We had 8 to 10 dormitory facilities there. Eight of those were burned to the ground, so we had to remove all of that debris. Sixteen of the 32 buildings inside the fence were partially or totally destroyed, so it was basically a demolition job first... after we got a number of inmates out. Then we had to start planning to rebuild the institution, and that was the beginning of modular construction, and cell blocks were built one at a time. We had to move inmates around. It was a long process.

McNaughton: Right. I do recall that when they started to tear down the six main cell blocks that were involved, they had to put a temporary sally port in the perimeter gate [fence] to be able to bring in the modular components of the new housing units that they were building. So that was kind of interesting.

Palakovich: Yes, we had a secondary sally port on the west side of the institution for not only the modular units, but construction crews and everybody that went in and out. We were running two institutions... we were building/rebuilding an institution and maintaining what was left of an institution at the same time.

McNaughton: And of course, throughout this whole time there was a continual state police presence. Tell me what it was like when it was time to release the state police. How did staff feel about that and do you remember when that was, like how long after the riot?

Palakovich: It was a very gradual reduction of the state police. I forget the total number we had immediately after the riot, but initially there was state police in every cell block that housed inmates after the riot. It was a step-down process. It went from cell blocks, and then we had them staged inside the institution for a while. The next phase was we removed them from part of the institution where we had a small group inside the institution, and then we had a group of state police that were stationed right outside the institution in the administration building. Eventually the numbers were reduced. Staff were very uneasy about having the state police leave the institution. It was the only way we could get back to normal... by getting the state police out of the institution. It was almost a little over a year... I think it was January 1991.

McNaughton: Wow. That is a long time.

Palakovich: It was a long time, yes.

McNaughton: The staff... like you said, that shock lasted for quite a while I'm sure. And speaking of that shock, let's talk about how the DOC worked to debrief individuals. Did you go through a debriefing?

Palakovich: No, I did not. Everybody else did. I did not go up.

McNaughton: Was that by choice?

Palakovich: That was my choice. Yes. I made excuses not to do it.

McNaughton: Tell me how the stress from all of this impacted you and your family. How did it show itself?

Palakovich: Probably in more ways that I will ever know. I guess I was so involved... I had a media briefing once a day for the next nine months after the riot. I was doing two or three a day, and then it went down to one... at least once a day, and I was getting calls every day from primarily local and state media. I can remember dealing with press every day for nine months about the riot. I guess I was under a lot of stress. I always say the salvation was Superintendent Beard was graceful enough to let me take a seven-week vacation over the summer. I took a long trip and I forgot about everything.

McNaughton: Wow! Seven weeks? Wow.

Palakovich: Yeah, we had a motor home at the time and took a trip across the country. It had been planned the year before. He didn't have to let me do that. That probably kept me in corrections, otherwise I probably would have left.

McNaughton: What was it like to come back after seven weeks... being free of it all?

Palakovich: It seemed like I just jumped right back into the routine.

McNaughton: Ok. So, you were kind of rejuvenated?

Palakovich: Rejuvenated. Everything new was starting to come along with the institution. I could see it being rebuilt and everything. I was a part of that. Time passed very, very quickly for the next 10 years. I'll put it that way.

McNaughton: There's always the rumor that somebody was killed during the riot. I've talked to several people who know firsthand that no, that is not true. But can you confirm for me that no one was killed during the riot?

Palakovich: No one was killed during the riots. That rumor continued because we had not been able to clear the physical count after the riot, and it took us 10 to 12 days before we finally figured it out.

What happened was, when we were transferring inmates out, everything was being hand written, and copies were being made of all the documents. On one of the transfer groups that went out to the federal system, we finally found it on one of the original copies... there was a misprint... a double entry. But we were able to clear the count. I kept getting calls, "We hear there's someone dead. Have you cleared count yet?" I said, "No. We haven't cleared count yet." [They'd ask,] "Why was there a refrigerator truck parked behind the kitchen area?" I said, "Well, that's to keep the food cold." But that rumor persisted.

McNaughton: Looking back on all of this are there any major snip-its or scenes in your mind that you recall or flashback to that you'd like to share... or interesting stories?

Palakovich: Probably a thousand. I'm thinking...

Probably the one that is still most vivid is when the hostages were coming out from inside the institution. And like I said, they were bringing them to the lobby of the administration building. I had just finished up and was just going out to a press conference and one of the staff members was out there and he was covered with blood. He had head wounds and there is a lot of blood with a head wound. I saw him and then having to go out and face the media. That was probably the toughest one.

McNaughton: It must be very difficult to know all of these individuals and to have to go out and be so matter-of-fact when you're addressing the media... that can be difficult to have that kind of poker face. I would think.

Palakovich: It's much harder than you can describe. To be honest with you.

McNaughton: Were there incidents where the media was showing a diagram of the institution and kind of telling about our tactical attacks?

Palakovich: Yes. There was an instance where they had a diagram and they were asking specific questions.

McNaughton: Can you explain to the listeners why that obviously would be a problem?

Palakovich: Well, that's obviously a problem because you're putting in danger the rescuers as well as the hostages when they're going into that area with a tactical team. With a tactical team going in, it's the element of surprise, and if the inmates know they are coming, it puts everyone in danger.

McNaughton: And the inmates could see this, because the local networks preempted the network shows and were showing everything live.

Palakovich: They were showing everything live, and most of the inmates had TVs in their cells at the time... since it was local, they didn't need cable, they could just get it on antenna. So, they were watching it... they were listening to it on the radio.

McNaughton: Amazing. Did you ever have problems with individuals running around among the media spreading rumors?

Palakovich: There were people talking to the media, and we could not control that. We just had to dispute the rumor and try to give the right answers.

McNaughton: John, I think that's it. I wanted to give you another chance if you had anything else that you wanted to share that we might have missed.

Palakovich: No. I think that's it.

McNaughton: Ok. Thank you very much....

Palakovich: Oh, here's an interesting thing... The first night of the riot, when they were going to try to relocate the inmates to the inmates to other institution, one option was Waymart, which was still a Department of Public Welfare facility at the time. Our neighbor at the time was the secretary of welfare, Karen Snider. She kept calling the institution and the department and could not get through. So, she called my wife at home and told her that the institution would be ready to take inmates at any time. My wife reached me on my direct line in the office and told me that, so I was able to relay that information to the Department of Corrections. That's how chaotic it was at the time.

McNaughton: At the time when everything started kicking off, the phone system just couldn't handle everything. We were getting calls from reporters and the switchboard at the institution was going crazy.

Palakovich: Oh, yeah. It was just total chaos. And you had all of the inmate family members calling in. You had all the staff members' families calling in to find out where people were. I know I had several friends... their wives called me, and said, "So and so hasn't made it home yet." And I said, "I know," but I couldn't tell them they were hostages at the time. It was crazy... totally crazy.

McNaughton: Thanks, John.

Palakovich: Good talking with you.

END