

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Clarence John Wingert – Mr. Twenty Twenty
Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots**
Interview Date: September 17, 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 individuals who were involved in important DOC events. 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 17, 2019, is Mr. Twenty Twenty, who is also known as John Wingert back in 1989. Thanks for joining us, Mr. Twenty Twenty.

Mr. Twenty Twenty: Oh, it's a pleasure, Sue.

McNaughton: Before we begin could you please provide us with a brief overview of your DOC career.

Mr. Twenty Twenty: I was a rookie at the time of the riot. I had been working for about four months for the Department of Corrections, and just was on the first day of the riot... they positioned me probably the furthest, probably the crappiest role in the big yard on the Group 2 and 3 area, which probably kept me out of a lot of trouble, which is really nice.

McNaughton: So, let me set the stage. It is around 2:30/3 p.m. on Wednesday, October 25, 1989, where are you and what's happening?

Mr. Twenty Twenty: I just came on duty... they put me in the far part of the yard for Group 2 and 3. I was way back by the fence where the inmates make deals, cut hair... just doing my job there. It was time to bring the inmates back in, and I had a handful of inmates that were just mucking around, they wouldn't move. They were taking their time. It was... I was basically trying to get them moving and get them toward E Gate, that I realized there was a problem... there were some guards attacked, including a friend of mine named Allen. It was then that I realized the inmates were hanging back trying to stay out of trouble and maybe even keeping me out of the way of what was happening.

McNaughton: And then what happened?

Mr. Twenty Twenty: That day was pretty short for me. Whenever I got back up to the E Gate area where the first commotion was, we did a little rescue where we had to go in and grab one of the hostages... or one of the guys who was getting beat pretty good in front of the kitchen. We

took him to the main gate, and it was somewhere around there when I was told to go the hospital with an inmate. That first night basically I just guarded an inmate at the local hospital until I went home and returned to work the following afternoon.

McNaughton: Afternoon the next day. The inmates watched the news around 6 o'clock, and this is after they had been locked in their cells and everything was "secured" at the facility. They watched the news. They are not happy, and then what happened and where are you?

Mr. Twenty Twenty: At that point in time, I was working with another fellow named Ray, and we were working in K Block, that would have been the honor block at the time. There was a commotion that happened in the block adjacent to there. Long story short... somehow Ray and I missed the evacuation order. We tried to lock ourselves in the box [switchbox] which was impossible because the box was destroyed. The inmates were able to let themselves out [of their cells] by reaching up and pulling on the control cables, because the panels were all ripped down from day one. Basically, once they started coming out in numbers, Ray and I made a run for it and we both got caught in the courtyard between Group 3 and Group 2... trying to head toward what was E Gate.

McNaughton: Then what happened?

Mr. Twenty Twenty: I got beat pretty good. Taken to E Block and then for the rest of the night basically transferred from one location to another as the night unfolded.

McNaughton: Were you blindfolded and handcuffed?

Mr. Twenty Twenty: Yeah. I was zip tied... man those suckers hurt. They were on too tight, and they loosened those up a little bit somehow. Blindfolded... put a bag over my head... all that good stuff, and they actually cooked a meal for me in the middle of the night, which was nice. I wouldn't eat it. I told them I was hungry, just trying to gain some rapport with the guys.

McNaughton: Were some of them trying to look out for you at all?

Mr. Twenty Twenty: Yeah, absolutely. There was a fellow who we called Tiny, he was a big guy. I remember him from... we were giving out coats one day, because obviously in October is heading into the winter. It seems like Tiny had a role in getting information out as well as keeping everybody safe in some way. I'm not really sure what all was going on there. The fellows that kept me captured... even they were decent. They explained to me, "Look, not only are we keeping you hostage, but we're also keeping you safe." Which totally makes sense, because you have over 2,000 inmates in there, someone's gonna kill ya. So, even though I was beat up pretty darn good, they did keep me safe from the other inmates that were rioting.

McNaughton: As they were holding you hostage, going on throughout the rest of the institution, was even more fires than had been burning the night before. Destroying all kinds of buildings and property and... we had staff trying to... in other places were also being held hostage or trapped as well. And the state police coming and finally there was an assault to free everybody. I just talked with a trooper who actually... his platoon led the assault on K Block. When things were coming to an end, where were you in the end but still a hostage?

Mr. Twenty Twenty: I was in E Block. I was in the barber shop cell of E Block and if I'm correct, I would have been the first hostage released. I'm pretty sure about that.

McNaughton: What was that process like... being released as a hostage? Explain to me how that happened.

Mr. Twenty Twenty: I knew something would have to happen with it getting closer to morning. That was probably the scariest point in time. [pause here]

McNaughton: I'm sorry.

Mr. Twenty Twenty: The ah... No. No. No. I'm actually shocked that I am this emotional, but ah... that's fine. Studies show that when hostages are being rescued, that tends to be most of the time when they die. Which sucks. Whenever they did the assault on the block, the inmates went on thinking I guess it was just going to be a fight, and there were some shots fired right outside the block doors. Then the inmates all ran back in and went toward the rear of the block, and it was at that point where I realized I was alone in my cell. I reached up and pulled my blindfold off and the bag off my head, and I could see they were shutting the door and put the key in the door to lock it. I was like, "F*ck man. I don't want to be locked in here with these guys." That's when they hit the door before they locked it and ran into the state police team right on the other side of the door.

McNaughton: Wow. I think I may have seen that.

Mr. Twenty Twenty: Yeah... I've seen the video... decades ago now. Yeah, you... I'm that guy.

McNaughton: Then, what. They passed you off and sent you where?

Mr. Twenty Twenty: At that point. They shoved a shotgun in my gut, which was totally understandable. One of my coworkers happened to be with the team and he recognized me as a hostage and they ... he walked me out to the main gate and they sent me to the local hospital there. I forget the name of it.

McNaughton: Holy Spirit [Hospital]?

Mr. Twenty Twenty: That's it.

McNaughton: Were you hospitalized then?

Mr. Twenty Twenty: I think they kept me over night... and took a whole bunch of x-rays and identified any wounds and so forth. I think I went home the next day and just enjoyed PSD for a while after that.

McNaughton: How long were you off, and did you go back?

Mr. Twenty Twenty: I never went back. I was basically in treatment/recovery for a couple of years before we all walked away from each other... that kind of thing.

McNaughton: I asked some of the other people how did the trauma show itself to them. A lot of them weren't hostages like you were. I imagine that the nightmares must have been pretty bad for a while afterwards.

Mr. Twenty Twenty: Yes, definitely. Night terrors. Night sweats... all that good stuff. I didn't like the sound of helicopters, chainsaws or anybody dressed in brown clothing for quite a while. All the usual triggers, and I managed to take care of that over time.

McNaughton: Tell me how did you end up from that scenario to Australia, and what are you doing in Australia now?

Mr. Twenty Twenty: Wow. What an awesome question and a very fascinating story. When I had PTSD, there were a couple of approaches I took to healing myself. One was diving into neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), which was being... let's say... advertised by Tony Robbins at that point in time. Since I wasn't sleeping and was living on Budweiser, I saw Tony on the late-night videos and dove deep into NLP at that point.

Another thing that I got into was Native American survival skills. I figured the first thing I wanted to do was unscramble my brain. The second thing I wanted to do was be left alone. I figured if I learned how to live in the woods nobody could bother me. So, that was the plan.

The cool thing that emerged from both of those was the people that I was learning the Native American Survival Skills from ... they also taught the old philosophies. The old Native American philosophies really are fascinating, grounding and healing. That, combined with neuro-linguistic programming, it basically became my career. I started putting out products having to deal with spirituality and self help and all sort of my weird-ass approach to stuff like that on the internet.

One day... I'm essentially lazy. I am a very lazy human being. I was reading how important it was to have market research, and I'm not really big on market research. So, I put up an ad – for \$50 I'll make a custom self-help recording for you. You send me an email, I'll send you one back. I'll send you an email, you send me one back. From those little couple of discussions, I'll make a custom recording for you.

A fellow in Australia ordered one. He was a Forex trader, and he shared it with his friend. His friend ordered one. Then they shared their recordings with a group of Forex traders, and they all ordered one. One of them became a coaching client. Then another one. So, we're doing Skype coaching... talking on the internet. Long story short, they said, "How about we fly you down here and you do a training with us?" I said, "sure." So, they flew me down, I did a training, and I met my wife. From there I began the immigration process down here.

Now, what's really cool, and I just love the way that weirdness and synchronicities show up... It was October 26, 1989, when I went to work at Camp Hill and I had that incident happen. That totally changed my life. It was October 26, 2010, when I flew down here to Australia, which essentially was a prison island, as you know they sent prisoners here. It was the same day, just a few decades later that I flew down here and met my wife and started all over again. Cool, isn't it?

McNaughton: Yeah, it is. Wow. Some of the things I asked individuals that were trapped or that were hostages is... how did you get through it when you were in the middle of it?

Mr. Twenty Twenty: I imagined the kids in my life. It was sort of like that whole thing like how they taught Viet Nam prisoners of war different imaginal techniques to get through the day. I imagined having kids in my life. I didn't have kids.

McNaughton: You were relatively young. How old were you when you were going through this?

Mr. Twenty Twenty: 23.

McNaughton: You didn't have your own kids, but you imagined that you did?

Mr. Twenty Twenty: Yeah, I imagined having kids. That was the big thing. I just experienced what would it be like if I had kids... the adventures that I would take them on... the places I would go... that kind of thing. It was something that implied that I survived the night. God, it was cool.

McNaughton: Did you have any training about that? How did you know to do that?

Mr. Twenty Twenty: I'd always been a "positive thinker" kind of guy... always into self help psychology. I read a little bit about a fellow named Neville Goddard, who taught this kind of thing as well. What was really cool, I'd taken my first LNP course when I was a police officer back in 1987-88, so when everything happened... it's just when I notice these are the tools that I'll use to get through the night and I have to dive deeper into this stuff to heal what is left over essentially.

McNaughton: Wow. If you could give advice to anybody who would find themselves in a similar situation, what kind of advice would you give to those people?

Mr. Twenty Twenty: Establish honest rapport. When I say that... there's a lot of courses out there on establishing rapport and different tricks to do. When the inmates that had me hostage had me hostage, I related to them as a human being. They'd be talking amongst themselves, I'd engage them in a little bit of conversation. It can be very simply... something like, "You know, I bet in a way you guys are scared. I would be too." Just being honest and telling them, "I am scared. We all don't know how this is going to play." Just the little bits of conversation allowed me to connect with them as human beings, and it was probably 3 in the morning and they cooked me a steak... or some kind of meat. I didn't eat it. But it was probably 2/2:30 in the morning when I told them I was hungry, and they actually cooked me a meal. I thought, "Well, eating this may or may not be a good decision."

But taking the time to honestly connect with them... because in hostage situations there's what's known as the Stockholm Syndrome, and it's basically where the hostage takes on the belief system of the captors. I approached it from an, "I'm going to invite them into my world." I'm wearing a uniform. They're wearing an inmate uniform. We are on opposite sides of the equation in some ways, but the common role that we all have is to survive the night. They don't want to die in the morning. I don't die during the night. Just really taking the time go... right Stockholm

Syndrome can work both ways. I want to be a decent, honest human being with these guys, and go from there.

The other part of the coin there... When I was guarding the inmate in the hospital... I was not a knucklehead with him. He's in the hospital, I'm in the hospital with him. I remember telling him, "Let's just make it through the night." I think they took him there for smoke inhalation. So, we're in the hospital and again I just carried on a conversation with the guy. When I was a hostage, the guy was back in the prison. They actually brought him in, and when they took my bag off and the guy said, "Yeah, that's him. He's alright." It's those little things... Obviously as a CO, you can't become "best friends" with the inmates, but you can definitely... the moto at least when I was there was care, custody and control... you can honestly care, and I think that goes a long way.

McNaughton: My hat's off to you, because you sound like you got your act together and that you're happy and you're positive and that's great. Because there could be some people who would just suffer, and I'm glad to see that you took the steps needed to just change your life and make it as best as you possibly can. That's wonderful.

Mr. Twenty Twenty: You know, my entire life at this point is devoted to that. There's a little phrase that shows up in my work a lot. It's "More Playtime and More Playmates." I get the reason why people end up becoming "bad guys," is because they took something too serious. When life gets to serious and we get bogged down in weird belief systems, weird pursuits... we end up chasing happiness, and that just becomes a problem vs. learning how to enjoy your day. Learning how to appreciate the gift that we are... the gift of life. We really need to stop and smell the roses. So many people don't do that. They work 40 hours a week. They spend two hours a day on the road. They never take the time to really appreciate life.

McNaughton: Is it fair to say that this event helped you to realize that? It's awful to thinking that being a hostage helped you with anything.

Mr. Twenty Twenty: I mentioned my email address twentytwenty@exhostage.com... That's important to me. ... This whole thing of ex-hostage... it's not ex-hostage to the Camp Hill prison riots even though that's part of it, but it's not being a hostage to trading time for dollars. Not being hostage to belief systems that keep you chasing happiness instead of enjoying life. To me that is really what it's all about. You've flown on an airplane before, right?

McNaughton: Yes.

Mr. Twenty Twenty: What's the question when you sit down and somebody starts talking to you? What's the number-one question they always ask? They always ask, "What do you do?" Everybody asks that question. ... People aren't really interested in your job. They could care less. It's almost biological... we want to know how do you serve? What do you give to the world? The number one thing that I took from the Camp Hill riots was... what am I here to give? What's my core value to the world, and as a part of that incident, I can very authoritatively say, "Your life is up to you."

That incident really helped me get... I could stay on... I could drink beer for the rest of my life and stay drunk. I could get on pharmaceuticals and have that manage my life. I don't want to be a manager. I don't want to have a life that needs managing. I choose to have a life that gets lived. Literally, that incident... it was something that took me from being like that positive thinker guy that I talked about to somebody who wants to get the message out, "Look, you came here to live. You came here to give in some way. Find out what that is. If you do that, the adventure that you'll go on is amazing."

McNaughton: Well, Mr. Twenty Twenty, I want to thank you very much for participating in this. It's a very inspiring story. I thank you so much.

Mr. Twenty Twenty: Oh, you're quite welcome. I've got to tell you... years ago I imagined something like this would come out of that incident, because... not only for the Department of Corrections but for people in general, because in the event that there's ever something like that again... which I'm sure there will be, people need to know that healing's possible. That actually getting on with their life is possible, and I thank you for the opportunity to share.

McNaughton: Thank you.

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