

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Kathy Flowers
Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots**
Interview Date: October 4, 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, October 4, 2019, is Kathy Flowers. Thanks for joining us, Kathy.

Flowers: Thank you.

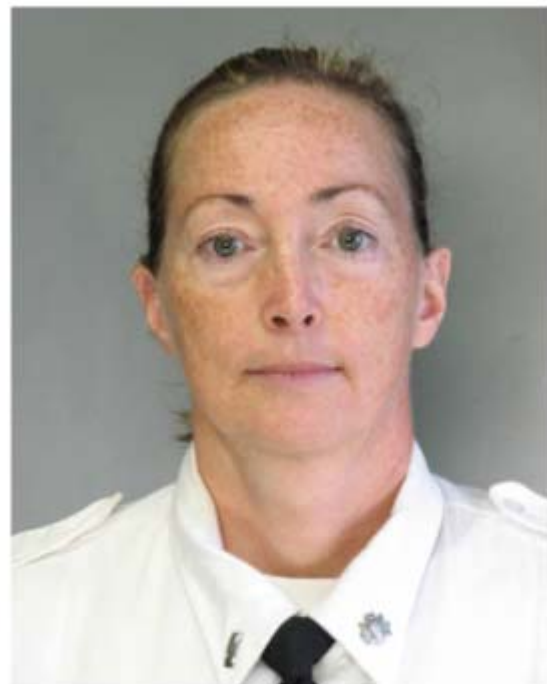
McNaughton: Before we begin, Kathy, could you please provide us with a brief overview of your DOC career?

Flowers: I worked for the Department of Corrections for 23 years. Three years at central office and the rest at SCI Camp Hill. I started July 10, 1989. I worked in the restricted housing unit as an officer, as a sergeant and as a lieutenant. I worked in the SMU [special management unit] as an officer, as a sergeant and a lieutenant. I was on the CERT team for 22 of those years.

McNaughton: Wow. And what year did you retire?

Flowers: 2012.

McNaughton: Thank you. So, let's get to the riot. I'm going to set the stage for you... it's around 2:30/3 p.m. on Wednesday, October 25, 1989... where are you and what's happening?



Kathy Flowers

Flowers: First off, let me say... at 2 o'clock, I was in the main stockade field. There were six officers and probably a thousand inmates. My relief was late that day, so I got relieved about 2:15 that day. By 2:30, I had just gotten home, and I had to basically turn around and come right back into work.

McNaughton: And how did you find out that you had to come back in? Did somebody call you?

Flowers: Yes. Sergeant Cleaver called me.

McNaughton: OK. So, tell me... as you're driving back to the facility, what are you seeing?

Flowers: Well, you know, I didn't have a lot of experience at a time. So, I really didn't know what to think. I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know really what was going on. All I knew was that I was going back into work and that something had happened. So, at the time I didn't really have any expectations.

McNaughton: OK. And when you were... when you reported to the institution... like some people went to the main gate and some people went to the rear gate. Where did you report to?

Flowers: I went to the main gate, and then I was directed to the front of the administration building.

McNaughton: OK.

Flowers: And can I interject something here real quick?

McNaughton: Yes.

Flowers: I had taken an EMT course, and during the course of the class, we were told about the "thousand-yard stare." When I got to the front of the administration building, I saw, at the time it was Sgt. Wolf, and one other officer and I can't remember his name, but they both were sitting on the steps in front of the administration building, and they both had that thousand-yard stare. That was when it really impacted me that something was going on.

McNaughton: So, tell the listeners what you mean by the thousand-yard stare.

Flowers: When people are in shock, their body just shuts down. They are literally looking at nothing. They are not seeing anything. They are not even processing anything. The look they have... it looks like they're looking off into the distance, but at nothing. There was literally nothing there.

McNaughton: ...and did you know... were these people... had they been hostages or were they just in shock from the overall experience of what was going on?

Flowers: I think they were in shock from the overall experience...

McNaughton: OK



Exhausted DOC and PSP employees resting against the back of the prison's administration building with a view of the facility directly in front of them.

Flowers: ...and I can't remember the officer's name, but his pant legs were torn from literally from his belt loop all the way down to the outside of his pantleg. The whole pantleg was torn.

McNaughton: Wow. OK so you said you were assigned to the administration building then

Flowers: Originally, yes.

McNaughton: OK, and what did you do there and how long were you there?

Flowers: You know, I wasn't there long. Mike Leidy was the training coordinator, and he came and got me... and something that really, really impressed me... he came and got me and said, "You have to come and see this." He took me to the back of the administration building, and the state troopers were lined up getting ready to go inside. There was a female lieutenant that was commanding them and leading them in, and he said, "You watch her. You watch her and learn from her." ... Excuse me...

McNaughton: That's OK.

Flowers: ... but I was really impressed by that, and she led them into this prison, and I just thought that was really cool.

McNaughton: Wow. Wow. ...and he obviously... Mike, saw something in you that he thought you needed to see that and... great. I'm glad that he did that.

Flowers: Yeah, yeah. I'd like to think so.

McNaughton: ...and then what happened?

Flowers: I was given a 38 and a handful of ammunition and I was taken to the main gate. There were some inmates sitting along the fence line right inside the main gate, and I was told, “Watch them. Just watch them.” That was really... at the time... all the information I was given, “Just watch them.”

But later they took us into the prison... the local police, fire... everybody was there, and they formed this huge gauntlet from Group 1, Group 2 all the way to the main gate, and myself and a bunch of other officers were taken aside, and we were escorting inmates out through that gauntlet, one at a time, out to the main gate. I can't remember...

McNaughton: Where were those inmates going? Why were they going to the main gate? Were they injured?

Flowers: No. They were all handcuffed, and they were all being taken to other jails.

McNaughton: Oh. And this is the first night?

Flowers: I don't... see... see... it's... I'm trying to think... was it the first night, or the second night?

McNaughton: Well, it's interesting because I had found some pictures of that. I'll have to look to see if I can see you in it, but there were these people lined up along that main walkway that ran between the education building and E block. Is that kind of what you're talking about?

Flowers: Yes.

McNaughton: ...and it was dark and I... I... they were... they were inmates being escorted, handcuffed, through this gauntlet like you explained, and it was dark in these pictures and I wondered what this was.



Inmates being escorted through a gauntlet of armed DOC employees, PSP Troopers and others.

Flowers: Yes, and that was... and those inmates... See, I can't remember, it's been so long. We were escorting them... I think to the main gate. I really think so. It might be something that you'll have to... you might want to look into that, but I remember escorting them into the gauntlet.

McNaughton: OK. Wow.

Flowers: I also remember... now I've never been in the military, and I've never been in a war zone, but the next day... that's exactly what it looked like. It looked like a war zone.

McNaughton: OK, well let me back you up... So, we're still the first night... when did that end for you? When did you go home?

Flowers: I didn't. I don't think any of us went home. I think we stayed there. We were there for 24... none of us went home.

McNaughton: OK. And then the next day, which was Thursday, October 26... after the inmates had watched the news around 6/6:30, they became enraged and then they broke out again... and that was around 6:30/7 o'clock. Tell me what you remember from that point forward.

Flowers: It's funny you say that because, when we were in the cell blocks... and again, I was pretty new... and some of the officers were showing me that they had taken the metal panels off the top of the blocks, and the officers were telling me that they could literally reached up and grab those panels and pull the doors open. Now, I don't know this for a fact, but I had been told that some of the officers asked for chains to chain the cell doors closed. I don't know that for a fact, but that's what some of the officers told me.

McNaughton: ...and so you're on the cell block...

Flowers: Yes, and the inmates were in the cells, and the tiers were just *littered* with garbage. Just littered, and there were probably six or seven inmates to each cell. The inmates were all handcuffed together, and really, we were just there. I think we were all so overwhelmed. It wasn't like anyone was making rounds or checking cells. We were just there.

McNaughton: So, at 6:30 or 7 o'clock... when they start breaking out, where are you... I mean...

Flowers: Ok, now that second day, I had gone home.

McNaughton: OK.

Flowers: So, the first night we were there all night and into that day... it was probably sometime in the early afternoon [of Thursday, October 26, 1989]... I went home... I got some sleep, but when I woke up, it was all over the news.

McNaughton: OK.

Flowers: They were out again, and then I came back in. I don't know how much to give you after that. Like I said, it was a blur.

McNaughton: Well, and that second day, then, they had the run of the entire facility... and probably around the time that you got there, they had just maybe rescued the people that were trapped above control. Do you remember that?

Flowers: I do remember that. I was at the main gate at that time. When I got back there, again, they gave me a 38 and a handful of ammunition, and they put me at the main gate, and I worked with Paul Beck and George Miller. The three of us were there are together working the doors. Because, I remember George Miller stood at the outside door and he had me stand at the inside door, and, basically, we were passing the key back and forth trying to get everybody in as quickly as possible. And, so, finally we were given the go-ahead to go ahead and open both doors so people could just go through.

McNaughton: Wow. Now there was a discussion... a lot of people talk about the fact that Commissioner Owens was there and wouldn't let Sergeant Beck open up the doors to let the state police in. Were you there for that?

Flowers: Yes. That's what came with George Miller and I...passing the key back and forth. We only had one key for both doors.

McNaughton: OK.

Flowers: So, he stood at the outside door, and I stood at the inside door, and finally Paul Beck just said, "No, open them both." So, we opened them both, and just let them go.

McNaughton: Because from what I hear, Beck was like begging the commissioner, "Let me open these doors," and the commissioner, I guess, wasn't making the decision or giving him the direction to do that, so he just, on his own, Beck said, "Open the doors." Yes?

Flowers: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

McNaughton: Wow. A lot of people referred to Beck now as "Saint Beck" for doing that.

Flowers: I can see why.

McNaughton: Wow. So, you were at the main gate then for the rest of that night?

Flowers: Yes.

McNaughton: ...and into the morning, obviously, in the morning then, before morning, they... the state police assaulted and then everybody went in and then regained control of the facility.

Flowers: Yes.

McNaughton: OK. Wow.

Flowers: It was later that day, or maybe even the following day... supposedly there were six inmates that they couldn't find, and they thought that they might be in the [deputy] superintendents compound, which was right there at the key room at the time.

They had myself and Mona Whitehead, who was still in the training academy at the time... we were the only two people that were small enough, apparently, to fit through the key room window. So, they had the two of us climb through the key room window, and they gave each of us a 38 and they said, "Go and see if those inmates are in there." And, we had no idea what we were doing. We're walking through, and things are smoking. There's a little bit of fire over here, and we're just walking around looking to see if there are inmates back here. They weren't. I think thankfully for us, they weren't.

McNaughton: Wow... and I know, too, that I talked to some people... where I guess while you were doing that, there were people in the tunnels looking for inmates as well, but it turned out to be...

Flowers: ...and I thought that was really where they found them.

McNaughton: Well, I didn't hear that. I hear that it was just really a paper glitch, and it really...

Flowers: Oh, OK.

McNaughton: ...it really came down to one inmate, and one of the officers was directed to take that one inmate, who was providing information, to Cumberland County [Prison]; and he did that, but there was no record... and so finally he came forward and said, "Yeah, I moved that inmate." I mean, they knew who... they knew exactly which inmate they were looking for, they just couldn't account for him, and sure enough then count cleared after that. I heard that from John Palakovich and a couple other sources and people that I interviewed. But, still, that's interesting because somebody else talked to me about the fact that somebody was trapped in the... in control and it was a bigger officer and he squeezed through the key room window and they were surprised that...

Flowers: Yes. It was Captain Bowser, and he probably weighed, I mean, he was only... I don't even know if he was six foot tall... had to have weight easily 400 pounds.

McNaughton: So, how did he squeeze through those bars?

Flowers: He made it through that window. Well, you know, what... fear does many things to people.

McNaughton: Wow. So, you got selected to do that because of your small stature. Yay! Lucky you! Huh?

Flowers: Exactly, yes.

McNaughton: What happened after that?

Flowers: I think we were busy just escorting inmates back and forth, and we were delivering meals a lot and trying to get things settled down.

McNaughton: I'm thinking about you as a female in a male dominated agency... you must have been only one of a few females that were inside at the time. Would you agree with that?

Flowers: Yes. I remember there was a black female... she was an officer, but she had been out to dinner and she came in... she was wearing a dress. She was... we were all right there working together. Honestly, I don't remember, at the time, there being any other women there during the riots. I'm sure there were, but I don't remember seeing them.

McNaughton: Did you ever have the thought like... "OK, these are a bunch of crazy men running around. What if they get their hands on me?"

Flowers: It's funny you say that, because the first night I was there, I got a chance to call my parents, and my dad said to me, he said, "You know if they get you... you know what they're going to do to you. You keep yourself safe." I said, "Don't worry. I'll be fine." I was never in fear for my life, but that's because I wasn't in there when it actually happened. I mean, I was already out when it first started. So, I didn't really have to fear for my life or anything else.

McNaughton: And the second night too, I guess you were so close to the exit... or the entrance of the facility... that you weren't deep inside and you certainly weren't alone.

Flowers: Exactly. Right. I will say... the first day that it happened... we were told first thing that morning, "Something's going to happen. Our intel says something's going to happen. Keep yourselves safe." I was the only woman working on that side of the prison that day, and my relief was 15 minutes late. So, that was probably the luckiest day of my life. Thinking back on it... I was very lucky that day.

McNaughton: Wow, because you were right there... in the middle of all of them.

Flowers: Yes, exactly.

McNaughton: And when you say you're in the yard... how many inmates? A thousand?

Flowers: Probably a thousand inmates to about six officers.

McNaughton: What other things do you remember that you would like to share?

Flowers: Let's see... honestly, off the top of my head... I really, I really couldn't say. I just... a lot of it was a blur, and a lot of it happened a long time ago. I remember that second day, and it looked like a war zone. I had never experienced anything like that before.

McNaughton: So, everything was on fire... and helicopters... and smoke... and then the mayhem. Also, I wanted to ask you, since you said you had taken a course to become an EMT, and you were right there... now you were probably very busy with manning the gate and doors there, but the triage... EMS triage was right there outside the main gate. Did you...

Flowers: It was right across the street. Yes.

McNaughton: Did you happen to take a look and kind of see, wow, that could have been you as an EMT?

Flowers: Honestly, I didn't even have time. I didn't even go over there. I just didn't even have time.

McNaughton: Interesting time in our history, isn't it?

Flowers: It was, and the aftermath... you know, we worked 12-hour days for probably six months, and everything was chained and barred and... it was just... you know, putting everything back together. It was really an experience.

McNaughton: They did fire the administration and brought in a new prison administration, and what can you tell me about that? What do you remember about them, and then, also, can you talk to me about what it was like as they were rebuilding the facility?

Flowers: They brought in Beard and Kyler. Beard was kind of aloof. I didn't really get to talk to him a lot, but Kyler... He came in like a gangbuster. Like I said, I was on the CERT team at the time, and he came out to our training and said, "This will never happen again. I want you guys prepared. I want you guys ready, and the next time, it won't be the state police going in. It will be you guys going in. He really got everybody's respect when he did that... or at least of the guys on the CERT team. Afterwards it was really tight. It was... everybody was escorted. Everybody was... everything was chained and locked. There were no activities. None. The education building was gone. The gym was gone. They had a movie theater... that was gone.



The destroyed auditorium.

McNaughton: Yeah, they damaged most of the facility.

Flowers: Yeah.

McNaughton: Then I guess it was a matter of shuffling inmates around to free up a housing unit to allow it to be torn down and then have it be rebuilt. So, it was just a lot of shuffling for a good while then.

Flowers: Yeah. For a while we have four or five or six inmates to a cell. It was... there were just finding places to sleep... mattresses on the floor and... it was just something.

McNaughton: [It's] something you'll probably never forget, but yet... and very vivid even though it's 30 years later.

Flowers: Yeah, yep.

McNaughton: I had some people tell me that they could [even 30 years later] smell the furniture factory burning... they could recall that smell.

Flowers: Yes. And the education building... it burned so bad that the glass in the windows melted.



Melted glass windows.

McNaughton: Yeah, the fires were so intense. Did you have any post-traumatic stress as a result of that? Any bad nightmares?

Flowers: No, no I didn't.

McNaughton: Alright. Is there anything else that you wanted to share that we might have missed?

Flowers: I don't think there is.

McNaughton: OK. Kathy, I want to thank you for participating in this program.

Flowers: You're welcome. I enjoyed it.

McNaughton: Great. Thanks.

END