

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Robert "Rocket" Williams
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 we 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, October 4, 2019, is Robert Williams, also known as Rocket Williams. Is that correct?

Williams: Yes, it is.

McNaughton: Ok. Thanks for joining us. Before we begin, could you just provide our listeners with a brief overview of your DOC career?

Williams: I started with the Department of Corrections in January 1986. I retired in April 2016. I had a 30-year career with the Department of Corrections. I started as a corrections officer 1, and I retired as a corrections officer 3/lieutenant.

McNaughton: Was that all at SCI Camp Hill?

Williams: Yes, it was.

McNaughton: Tell me why they call you Rocket.

Williams: I got the Rocket name earlier in my career due to my enforcement of discipline and the backing up of correctional staff at the facility. I just happened to be on-the-spot for a lot of incidents. They'd ask, "How'd you get here so fast?" I'd say, "I was here when it started."

McNaughton: Let me set you up for this discussion, which is about the Camp Hill riot. It is 2:30/3 p.m. on Wednesday, October 25, 1989. Where are you and what's happening?

Williams: On that day... it was my day off, but about 2:40 or so, I got a call from the shift lieutenant, Lt. Wolf, advising me that I'd been activated as a member of the CERT team and to respond to the facility immediately. So, I proceeded to the facility. I was there by about 3 o'clock. I was directed to the rear gate where I met up with the other CERT members. We rallied in the rear gate sally port and then we were waiting for instructions on what we were to do.

McNaughton: Tell me, up to this point, what CERT was like at the prison. What kind of training did you receive up to that point?

Williams: I was on the team about two years at this point, and all we had was surplus gear and equipment. Surplus vests from the military... a couple of batons... a little bit of chemicals, and not much of a battle plan.

McNaughton: Essentially your training was, "Here's some used equipment and get ready to do whatever we tell you, although we don't really train you on what to do."

Williams: That's correct. Somebody's in charge. Do what they tell you.

McNaughton: You're inside the sally port... rear gate... and you're all forming up. What are your orders? What happens next?

Williams: We're standing by at the rear gate. The CERT team at the time was probably a 40-man team with everybody assembled at one location. Currently as we're standing in the sally port, we have about eight people. Eight people that had the courage to respond to an incident like this. We had enough for one squad.

McNaughton: OK. What were you seeing? What was going on around you or in front of you?

Williams: The riot was pre-forecast. This was the third riot of the year... or in the month. We followed Pittsburgh. We followed Huntingdon, and then it was our turn. A smart staff member would stay home that day. As you know, I came in. I responded. A smart staff member, if he got out of the facility that day or any other day, he would be wise to go home.

[Williams' phone rang here]

McNaughton: And at this time, things are on fire in the Group 2 and 3 part of the institution?

Williams: Yes. The 2 and 3 facility side of the facility was on fire, and we evacuated all of the inmates out of the modular trailers. That wasn't too much related to the incident going on on the other side of the facility.

McNaughton: Where did you evacuate those inmates to?

Williams: We put them on the main stockade field.

McNaughton: Was the rest of your time spent...

Williams: As a team we moved up to where that E Gate tower is, and we just manned that spot there. The inmates were there hurling rocks and stuff at us. A guy on my left got taken out by a rock to the chest. Again, we're only eight men. He got hit in the chest with a rock, and the guy on my right got taken out by an orange that came flying over the fence, bounced off the ground and hit him in the groin. He's standing there, and the CERT team members are being taken out by thrown objects. Then the sad part is... that's when they brought the... this was the first day then... they brought the staff down in front of the kitchen and tortured them in front of us. Staff hostages down in front of the kitchen and tortured them as we were standing there.

McNaughton: I had interviewed some other people that were saying that really all you could do was just stand there and scream at them to stop, but on the other side of that fence you had hundreds and hundreds of inmates.

Williams: That was the fact, and it's very difficult to say that you didn't have courage to go get them.

McNaughton: Awe. But, had you gone in, you could have ended up being a hostage as well.

Williams: Personally, if we went in as men... the inmates, they're not men. They are cowards. They would have scattered. That's the sad fact.

McNaughton: This went on until 11 or 12 that night.

Williams: Yes, it did.

McNaughton: And then what happened?

Williams: Somehow, they negotiated a peaceful resolution. I may have my dates mixed up.

McNaughton: I think you're right.

Williams: The first day we took the inmates out of the trailer, put them in there, and then we let the hostage negotiation team resolve the incident. So, the CERT team wasn't used on the first day.

McNaughton: On that first night, while you're standing there at the E Gate, Gere Kostelac and a couple other people are stuck up on the roof. You were right there. So, you must have seen how they were rescued.

Williams: I know he was in the area. I don't recall him specifically.

McNaughton: And then they brought in a fire truck and put up a ladder and had them come down the ladder.

Williams: Possibility. I can't recall. I remember the fire truck coming in, because what the inmates did... that we put on the main field that weren't involved in the riot... they set a shed on fire underneath the tower to burn the officer out of the tower. So, we had to bring a fire truck in for that to put out the fire. As long as he was there we could use the ladder to get them off the roof.

McNaughton: Then they did the negotiations, and the inmates were returned to their cells.

Williams: Yes.

McNaughton: And then... what happened after that?

Williams: I went home and then I came in the next day on the 2-to-10 shift.

McNaughton: Oh. Alright. Let me set you up for that night. It's around 6/6:30 p.m. on Thursday, October 26. Where are you and what's happening?

Williams: I'm assigned to E Block in Group 2 and 3 side of the facility, which is the side that just had the disturbance the day before. I'm on E Block.

Usually when you relieve the shift in front of you, they tell you what the count is, who had control of the keys and let you know what's going on for the day. So, we had the briefing. We haven't got the keys back from yesterday. So, the doors aren't locked. The cell doors aren't locked. All we had to do on 6-to-2 was feed them and make sure medical was here. I believe that's what our briefing was... we're going to feed them a meal and address any medical issues they had.

Slowly, we'll trying to find the keys to the unit, so we can lock all the doors. They actually disabled the locks above the doors. So, the appropriate response would have been to put a chain and a padlock on each door. Here by 2 o'clock in the afternoon, they hadn't even considered that option, I don't believe; and we had six cell blocks, so that would have been a massive undertaking to have a chain and lock for every door for six cell blocks.

McNaughton: So, they didn't put chains and locks on the doors?

Williams: They did not. So, above the cell doors there was [what's called] a rod box, which holds the internal lockings of the mechanisms. Well, the inmates, on the first day of the riot, took the covers off the rod boxes. So, they had direct exposure to the locking mechanism just by reaching out their cell door and reaching up above their head there and hitting a lever themselves to unlock their door.

McNaughton: Normally that would be controlled at the end of the block in the switch box, with the levers, right?

Williams: Correct. Should only be one spot where you can open door... or two spots... one manually with a key at the door itself, and the second one up front, which is what we used all the time.

McNaughton: So, there you are... you're sitting in the block and you can hear the inmates leaving themselves in and out of cells?

Williams: Oh, no. For the first couple hours of the day, they were pretty... they were vocal. They were yelling about how they just kicked our ass, and saying, "If things don't change we're going to kick your ass again."

But, you go down the tier. You do your job. You address any issues, and you ask for your keys back. "Anybody got the keys," I asked. "Anybody got the cell block keys down here?" I used humor throughout my career, "Come on. One of you guys must have the keys."

McNaughton: Oh my.

Williams: I didn't get the keys. It was a pretty tense couple, four hours.

Then the 6 o'clock news came on. Half of the inmates had TVs in their cells, so you just stand at the cell door if you wanted to know what happened at the Camp Hill prison, because its going to be on the nightly news. Correct? You agree with that right?

McNaughton: Yes.

Williams: We're standing at a cell door along with the other inmates, and everybody's quiet for the 6 to 7 o'clock news. They want to hear how they did. Inmates wanted a report.

So, on the 6 o'clock news, it said, "There was a disturbance at the Camp Hill prison yesterday and a few staff were beat up..." blah, blah, blah... there's the superintendent of corrections going to give you an overview [*he meant superintendent of the prison*].

Live news, now, and the superintendent says, "The deal I made with the inmates yesterday... I'm taking all that back." [He said this] on the news. He was out front of his office, "Yesterday we had a disturbance here. I made a deal with the inmates to reverse the policies, and today I'm telling you that I'm not honoring that deal."

McNaughton: Wow.

Williams: That was the live news broadcast. My mouth dropped... hit the floor. The inmates in the cell I was watching TV with... their mouths hit the floor. Then the inmates were waiting until the 6:30 news.

It [the news] says, "Camp Hill riot, Camp Hill, Pennsylvania... a few things happened..." blah, blah, blah.

After the news came out... at 7 o'clock, they all came out at once.

So, you're standing on the tier. They threw water up onto the lights of the cell block... we had light bulbs on the cell blocks. They took a cold cup of water and threw water on the bulb. The bulb exploded. The lights went out. They turned their cell lights out, and they stepped... at about 7 o'clock... about 7:05, about five or six cell blocks reported the same thing.

The area lieutenant, Lt. Renninger, immediately ordered the evacuation of all of his six cell blocks... down to the E Gate tower, "All staff, report to the E Gate Tower," because he knows none of the six cell blocks are secure. He came on 2 o'clock with us. The area lieutenant knows his cell blocks are not secure... the staff are in danger. He's watching the news somewhere also.

So, we meet there at the E Gate tower. You try to lock the doors. You evacuate the block as best you can. You hope you brought everybody with you. My thought... we had no lock to the front door, so you call down to the lieutenant. He had a key to the front door. Send somebody up so we can at least lock the front doors. The inmates... we can't keep them in their cells, but we can at least try to keep them in the buildings. The officer never got there in time. We locked six cell doors.

We're six cell blocks up, and the inmates busted out into the area in front there. I believe five of the cell block staff made it to the E Gate tower. One cell block didn't make it.

This is very difficult...

So, when you're working in a facility that you know is going to explode someday, you make some commitments with other staff, "You won't leave me, and I won't leave you." We've got wives and kids at home. We've got young children.

I made a commitment to Mr. Eckenrode...I won't leave him. He was on K Block at the time, and I was on E. He's one of the staff that didn't make it down to the gate.

So, we're all standing at the gate there, trying to get all the staff down there, but unfortunately, two of them didn't make it.

And the inmates broke through the gate and chased the rest of us across the facility over to the key room. Now you're locked in the key room with about 20 staff that just ran completely across the facility with inmates chasing them. Then the inmates started throwing Molotov cocktails through the [windows]... they smashed out the glass in the offices around the control desk and threw Molotov cocktails in on us.

So, what are you going to do? Are you going to die in that building? Or are you going to become Rocket Williams and open that fucking front door and get up there and kick some ass?

[Can't determine the name of the person he mentions] said, "Rocket Williams, get up here. I'm going to open this fucking front door. You get the fuck out of here, and you get to the fucking main gate and get us some weapons." I said, "Aye, Aye, Captain."

At the time, I was a black belt in jujitsu karate... that's why they called me Rocket Williams.

I ran out to the main gate, dodging all them inmates, and I got to the armory and got me a shotgun and probably about 30 rounds of ammunition. I came back to the main gate. By that time the inmates had complete control of the area.

I saw some brave staff members dressed in inmate uniforms being led out to the gate by inmates. The inmates dressed staff that they liked in inmate uniforms and escorted them to the main gate, where I was able to identify my staff members.

Sgt. [Paul] Beck was at the main gate, and he had enough CERT team members show up at the main gate... about six of us. He wanted permission to let the six staff members in the jail to get back into that building that was on fire, so we could rescue them staff members. The commissioner of corrections was sitting at the main gate at the time... Mr. Owens... Sgt. Beck is pleading with him, "Give me an order, Sir, what to do! People are dying in there! Give me an order!"

He wouldn't issue an order.

Sgt. Beck said, "Fuck it then! I'm opening this gate. This CERT team's going in."

Sgt. Norris was in charge of the CERT team at that time... Edward Norris. He laid down some chemicals, and gave verbal directions to the inmates that were trying to give up over by the chapel and stay in the chapel area. He said, "If you're giving up, stay in the chapel area, but anybody on this sidewalk is going to be put down."

We got down to the area where the control desk was. Inmates were on the roof, and they were about to kick in the windows and capture the 52 staff members on the roof.

They [the trapped employees] yelled down to me, "Rocket, Pass up that shotgun!" I said, "Send something down [to use to pass the shotgun up]." They sent down a couple of black belts – officer belts. I said, "You're about eight feet short. I can't reach." So, they tied on an extension phone handle to the black belts, and I tied my shotgun on there, and I hoisted it up there.

I believe Sgt. Stokes had the shotgun. He racked around and blasted a shot inside the building, and the inmates scattered. Then we were able to enter the building and free the hostages up through the infirmary door.

Once the 52 staff members made it to the main gate... again, a wise staff member would get in their car and go home at this point... and a lot of them did. They just drove right off.

I'm at the main gate, I know Mr. Eckenrode has been captured. I get on the phone and I call my wife and tell her, "Go over to the Eckenrode's house. Ray's been captured. Get his two small children and bring them back to our house, and I'll let you know if I can find him."

Then we had enough force to go back into the facility, and we just held a little bit of the zone 1 area. We took back just a little bit of the ground that night.

I got on a radio, and an inmate was calling, "Inmate to control. I have a staff member we want to surrender... critically injured staff member. We want to surrender. Inmate to control." I said, "That inmate can't be anywhere near us because the control desk is on fire already." It had already been fire bombed... heavy smoke damage. No fire got into it, but smoke damage.

So, I contact Lt. Miller [Dick Miller], "Lt. Miller, I've got a radio." The inmates have about 12 of our radios, so it's really hard to communicate with anybody. "Lt. Miller, I have an inmate saying he wants to give up a staff member. What's your direction?"

Lt. Miller said, "Have the inmates bring the staff member down to the barricade."

I communicated that to the inmates and told them to bring him down to the barricade, which was at the E Gate tower area.

We are over at the crosswalks area in front of building 15. We stood there, and we saw them... now we're not coming to the barricades... they have to bring them to the other side of the barricade... is what the lieutenant's direction was.

So, the inmates threw the unconscious officer off the barricade... laid down in front... and he laid down in front of the barricades. And I prayed to God that he would get up and run. But he didn't get up.

He's now a good 80 yards out from us, which is a good distance between him and the safe spot. So, I said to lieutenant, "We've got to go get him!"

The inmates said they weren't coming across the barricade... they'll put him on the other side of the barricade. But we're not turning on the inmates. It was obviously white inmates bringing a

white officer out, and they didn't want to upset the other inmates. So, they weren't going to carry him all the way to us.

I said, "Lieutenant, Let's go get him!" I'm with about 20 staff members there on the skirmish line and said, "Let's go get him, boys! Let's go get him. It's a CO, man. Let's go!" Nobody would come. Nobody volunteered. We've got to get him.

I figured it was Mr. Eckenrode. That's what I thought.

So, one officer spoke up, "Rocket, I'll go with you." It was Sgt. Jeff Dietrick... he was a CO at the time. Jeff said, "I'll go with you, Rocket." So, I made the commitment with him too at that place and time.

So, we ran over to a gauntlet of tools being thrown at us... rocks, fruit, saws... all kinds of stuff just bouncing off us without feeling it. We snatch him up and we dragged him back, and we get in front of the education building.

Now, Mr. Eckenrode, he was a big fellow. He was... that's why he was on my team. He was about 220 pounds, and me and Mr. Dietrick, we were about 130 pounds.

So, we dragged Mr. Eckenrode to the front of the education building, where I feared the inmates would charge over that barricade and come capture both of us. So, I told Jeff, "If that happens, take the fuck off. I'll stay here."

At the same time, I'm waving to the guys at the skirmish line, "Come on up!" We already drug him halfway back to the safe zone. Come on up! I'm waving to them, "Come on up! Come get us! We need help, we're tired. We can't do it!" Then they wouldn't come. I don't know if Lt. Miller ordered them to stay back there so no more staff would get captured or what.

All of a sudden, the biggest corrections officer I ever saw came running out and said to me, "I got this man." And he picked that officer up, put him on a cart and we wheeled him to the main gate. That biggest corrections officer I ever saw... it was a trainee... brand new, never even met him before... I'm in my almost fourth year there. His name was William Rhoades. Rhoades. He had the courage to charge out that line as a trainee... a new hire.

So, we got there and got Mr. Eckenrode to the main gate. I called my wife. I told her, "Take all of our children over to the Swartz's Family," because I made a commitment with Officer Swartz also... "Take all of our children to the Swartz's Family. You and Mrs. Eckenrode go down to the hospital. Ray's been beat up something horrible."

I went back in and held out the night on the skirmish line until a thousand state troopers came with us to begin the assault on the next day.

I do want to thank Officer Jeff Dietrick and Trainee Williams Rhoades for heroic actions on that day.

McNaughton: Thank you for sharing this story.

Williams: I only ever told that story about five or six times during my whole 30-year career, but Billy Rhoades is my guardian angel. Another time, many years later, I was severely injured at work. I had my wrist cut real bad. Billy Rhoades was there to give me first aid. Did you ever see Billy Rhoades, or did you do a phone interview with him?

McNaughton: I did a phone interview with him.

Williams: He's like 6'5" 400 pounds of muscle... at the time. We were in our 20s back then.

McNaughton: Right. He mentioned you. He mentioned you running to save the hostage.

Williams: Yep.

McNaughton: Quite a camaraderie among all of you officers.

Williams: Yep. So, we're not personally friends, we're just co-workers. I got a small house. He don't fit through my front door. I like small cars. I'm only 5'6". If you take him to dinner, he eats more than I eat in a week. We're just co-workers. He's my guardian angel... that's for sure. It was three times that he saved me. I've only told you about two of them.

McNaughton: When did you finally get to go home after all of that?

Williams: Well, we had six severely-damaged cell blocks and we had about 1,200 inmates and 1,500 inmates living on a field, because they burned the trailers down that held about 400 inmates. Then the 1,200 inmates in the cell blocks... they destroyed the doors. They had to take the parts from one or two of the cell blocks to make one or two good cell blocks. While we were pretty much... had to clean up the cell blocks, is what the problem was, first of all before you could repair them. So, there was a lot of trash cleanup for a couple of days. Then, fortunately, the weather held nice... it was nice weather. If it was cold nights, we would have been in big trouble.

Eventually we put the inmates back in cells with no equipment... four to a cell is how we had to manage it for a while.

McNaughton: And they were handcuffed and shackled to each other?

Williams: Yes. They could still break out of the cells. It was kind of a false secret that the walls of the whole facility were hollow. It was built to hold children. It wasn't built to hold a man. So, they saved money, they put hollow bricks in the whole place. So you could rip your sink off the wall and smash it against the wall, and let yourself out of the cell. So, that's why we had to handcuff and shackle them to the cells, because they could rip... that secret was out. That probably was a maintenance secret for a number of years, but widely known now to the inmate population.

McNaughton: Of course, if they are handcuffed to each other, it's a lot harder to move as a group of four or eight vs one person, right?

Williams: Correct.

McNaughton: Let's move forward now to the superintendent and the deputies have been let go, and how did they... and by "they" I mean the department and the institution... how did they rebuild the institution?

Williams: Construction on the Camp Hill facility lasted about 25 years. It started actually in 1987, when they upgraded the power system. Almost my whole entire career the Camp Hill facility was under construction or reconstruction. So, your question was we lost all the top of our administrators and we're a facility running on somebody temporary. And you've got to remember, a lot of your staff didn't come back. Your dedicated staff came back, but your other staff... they said it's too dangerous and they went out on sick leave. So, you didn't have enough corrections officers for three shifts. We only had enough officers for two shifts. Then you had CERT teams from other facilities fill in with staffing that you didn't have.

McNaughton: And that's why they went to the 12-hour shifts then as well.

Williams: Correct. The whole second shift got wiped out in three days of rioting. You didn't have any second shift left. Like I said, a smart staff would have gone home, because you love your children. You shouldn't have to go through a work event like I had to go through. You should have to.

McNaughton: Then they brought in Superintendent Beard and Ken Kyler and John McCullough.

Williams: Yes. Ken Kyler had a huge, different philosophy than the last deputy.

Deputy Smith's philosophy was... as correctional staff, you'll never put your hands on inmates for any reason, and he made an example... in 1986, he fired eight RHU officers... demoted a few. He set the standard. I'm Deputy Smith... there will be no inmate assaults. There were alleged assaults by staff... alleged abuse. He was firing staff, so the staff were afraid to protect themselves. I might get fired. If an inmate assaults me, I've got to let him assault me, because if I fight back the deputy may think I started the fight and fire me. I've got a wife and kids.

So, Deputy Kyler had a different position on that. His is, "No. You protect yourself. No wonder why this jail burned down. Staff didn't know they had the ability to protect themselves." He came from Huntingdon. They had a little bit different rules in Huntingdon than you did at the friendly Camp Hill retreat.

McNaughton: A couple of days before Camp Hill, Huntingdon had a pretty serious incident in one of their cell blocks and they shut that down and took care of that right away.

Williams: Immediately. They went in there ... with weapons. We didn't use weapons. We used negotiators. And then Pittsburgh went off just a couple of months before that also. There were three riots that year --- Pittsburgh, Huntingdon and Camp Hill.

McNaughton: And Rockview had a situation earlier that year as well. I talked to John McCullough about that as well. So, there were like little powder kegs all over the state in our institutions.

Williams: Yes. Correct. Here's what... we all knew it was bound to blow up some day. So, one of the offensive procedures Camp Hill took is... we gave every staff member a whistle. That way, when something's going down, we'll know right where to respond to.

McNaughton: How'd that work out?

Williams: Oh, naturally, during the riot, there were whistles blowing all night long by the inmates that captured staff members. It didn't work out too well. Now remember, take a note... we had a six-month disturbance in the Camp Hill RHU... I don't know if you were aware of that.

McNaughton: Yes, I did.

Williams: April. I was involved in that incident. I would like to cover that one also.

McNaughton: Yes, so tell me what happened in the RHU.

Williams: OK, We're holding all of the rioters in the Camp Hill RHU. We have two RHUs now because we had so many people to charge... I think we were charging 300 inmates with riot-related charges. The RHU only holds 110 inmates. We held the worst 110 inmates in the RHU.

The one guy that was charged with 52 counts of attempted murder... and after six months in the RHU, the inmates believed that they served enough RHU time. Prior to the riot, if an inmate assaulted a staff member and got 90 days in the hole, but if you got a jail full of 2,000 inmates that are out of control and you only have 100 RHU cells, then you're probably letting them out in 20 days. They're cutting their time. Instead of doing 90 days for assaulting a staff member, we're going to let you out in two weeks, because we need that bed for the next guy that assaults a staff member. So, we're always giving them free breaks on the RHU time. And you could assume that most of the rioters were regular RHU clients through the years, because they were behavior problems.

So, this time they were locked down for a six-month stretch steady. Steady, straight. They're not getting out until after your trial, and that's going to be another two years. So, they were upset. They'd say, "You can't hold us this long. It's ok to charge us and give us more street time, but not hold us in the RHU this long."

So, they ripped off the sinks in their cells, and they busted through the walls, again because they were hollow. Then they started teaming up on each other. When they got four or five other inmates together, then they busted out onto the tier. Not that they could get out of the building, but it's hard to go down the tier when they're throwing toilet pieces at you... and sink pieces... and bricks at you. There were no screens on the doors. They're open bars.

So that night on the 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. shift, we were forced to do 14 cell extractions to stop that disturbance.

McNaughton: So where did you put them?

Williams: They're not chemical cell extractions in those days. They are... five-man team with a shield. Pin the inmate to the back of the shield, and subdue him... the old-fashioned way.

McNaughton: That must have been terrifying. There you are, six months after the worst experience that you've ever had, and it's like it's happening again.

Williams: The part that was terrifying was I made it out. Only the best 10 percent of the officer corps works around the level 5 inmates. I was proud to be identified in my second year as one of the best corrections officers. Then I was kind of upset that I had to ride out the next two years in the RHU with the people that abused my staff and stuff. It was a difficult time.

McNaughton: I can imagine.

Williams: Because the inmates were bragging, which staff members they raped. They're yelling out the cell doors, "We raped so-and-so! We're going to get you next. We did this to him... he cried like a baby!" I had to listen to crap like that. The victimization of your staff members. But, a couple of years later, life's better.

McNaughton: And of course then they totally tore down those six original housing units and rebuilt the facility. You can talk about how that prison is nothing like it was back when the riot happened.

Williams: That is correct. By the time I went into the Department of Corrections, I was brand new. I didn't know anything about prisons really. I did know that it was my life goal to be a corrections officer. As a boy, I dreamed of being a corrections officer. It's the only job I ever had. So, I met my lifelong expectation.

The Department of Corrections was a simple operation back then, but we were overcrowded. There was a war on drugs, I believe, and it just packed the facilities to overflow capacity, and nobody had an answer how to control that.

McNaughton: I was talking to someone yesterday who worked in the statistics office at central office, and they were seeing a gain of 500 inmates a month, leading up to this and they were trying to tell people, "We've got a problem. We've got a problem."

Williams: Right. But the Department of Corrections was a small agency with a little of a budget. Not really having any troubles, so nobody knows about you. Why give money to somebody you don't know about? Then the riot happened, and they realized how badly we were way behind. I always take... the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania was the leader of the nation's correctional system. I always took pride in that fact. Then after the riot, we opened up, and we had invested a lot of money. We came a long, long way. I was very proud at the end of my career, how far we came to get back on the top.

McNaughton: We certainly did learn a lot from that terrible, terrible situation. I'm so sorry that I'm making you go through all of this pain again.

Williams: That's OK. It's not your fault. I always regretted not being able to get up on a stage and tell Jeff Dietrick's heroic actions and Bill Rhoades.

McNaughton: Yeah. Well now you have. I'm going to take all of this [interview], and I'm going to transcribe it and share it with the archives. It will be over and collected and kept by the state forever.

Williams: Thank you. That was my only regret I had. And then one more... So, I had to put in a lot of time after that. It was pretty difficult. I had substance abuse issues. I was tremendously disciplined through my career, but I kept a smile on my face and I was the Rocket. So, I role-modeled professional behavior. This is a rather touchy subject...

I got myself in trouble with substance abuse after that. I was fired, and the union won my job back. So, I was a disgraced employee back at the Camp Hill facility. And one staff member helped me regain my professional bearing and stature, and I want to thank her. Her name is Marirosa Lamas. I was a sergeant without a housing unit, and she was a new unit manager struggling. So, I told her, "If she helped me, I'd help her." I made a commitment to her. So, there you go... I'm a... I was a substance abuser with the Department of Corrections, and I retired as a lieutenant and I'm thanking Marirosa Lamas.

McNaughton: I will make sure she hears this. And you know, don't be embarrassed or ashamed of that, because corrections is a hard job on everybody...

Williams: I could tell that story a lot about being terminated. I own that one.

McNaughton: But, you know, times are different now. Substance abuse disorder is...

Williams: It's prevalent in our field, I'm aware of that. But you know the inmates called me the dope-smoking lieutenant. The inmates in my facility, "There's the dope-smoking lieutenant. There's a man... he's got a white shirt because God has his back." It's true, I'd say, "You're right, man. God has my back. That's why I have a white shirt and I am the dope-smoking lieutenant. How are you guys doing today?"

That's how I've got to face that. So, I got fired for substance abuse, but it's been an excellent career overall. It was a career I picked out. I wanted it. I grew up wanting to be one... a corrections officer. It's been great. When I was down, God sent Billy Rhoades and Marirosa Lama to help me out.

McNaughton: There you go.

Williams: Ok. Back to your questions if you still have them.

McNaughton: Wow, I just... I don't think I have any more. I just want to thank you so much for sharing your memories with me, because everybody that I talk to has their own different vantage points and perspectives. As I talk to more people, they all connect. I talked to Joe Miller. I talked to Bill Rhoades, and now I talked to you. I've talked to a couple of people around the control center that second night. It's amazing. Amazing stuff that went on inside that fence that people didn't know.

Williams: We were a tight staff... it made the staff really tight for years and years as a bonded family. The ones that came back... I still have problems with the staff that went home and came back a year or two later... that didn't work that day. That's what gets me.

McNaughton: Right.

Williams: But... that's all I got.

McNaughton: Thank you so much. I want to thank you so much.

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