

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Sammy Smith
Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots**
Interview Date: October 3, 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 3, 2019, is Sammy Smith. Thanks for joining us, Sammy. *[NOTE: there is wind interference from Smith's side of the phone call.]*

Smith: You're welcome. Thank you for talking to me.

McNaughton: Sure. As we begin, could you please provide us with a brief overview of your DOC career?

Smith: I started in 1981. I worked J Block for years. Then I worked on the team for a couple of years. I made sergeant, and then I finally retired as a lieutenant in 2003. I had 22 years there.

McNaughton: Thank you. Let me set you up for the riot. It is around 2:30/3 p.m. on Wednesday, October 25, 1989, where are you and what is happening?

Smith: I just made sergeant and I just got on the daylight [shift]... at that time we lived in New Cumberland, so I was already home. My father called me and wanted to know what was going on in the jail. I said, "Nothing. I'm home now." He said, "Well, they've got a riot going on." I said, "Nobody called me," because I was on the emergency response team and live less than 10 minutes away. So, I called in and they told me to come in.

I went to the rear gate and borrowed a sergeant's shirt from the Graterford bus that was up there, and we just stayed at the rear gate while the state police was trying to get the inmates back in their cells, because there were a lot of plain-clothed inmates wearing civilian clothing because of where they were housed at. They didn't want me to get mixed up with them. I had blue jeans on. They told me to show up anywhere, anyhow. So, I showed up quick, and that's where I was the first night.

McNaughton: That makes sense, because I had other people tell me they wouldn't let another officer in unless he was wearing an officer's uniform or officer's shirt. So, probably a lot of people don't realize that some of the inmates were allowed to wear street clothes in the evenings.

Smith: Down in the one modular... there was a rehab program... they allowed them to wear civilian clothes during certain hours of the day and on weekends.

McNaughton: What happens after you get there and you put your shirt on and you go in?

Smith: They kept me mostly at the rear gate for quite a long time.

Then a couple officers I knew came out and they were pretty... Officer Arnold came out, and he was pretty well busted up real bad. I was his sergeant on 2-to-10 on that block. We talked for a while.

Eventually, after they got all of the inmates that were running around back in, they let us go in. They had most of the inmates down in the big yard there down in Group 2 and 3. We got everybody there until they wanted them back in their cell blocks.

Then we stayed there in the block that night. You could hear them [the inmates] opening and closing cell doors, because the top part of the... where the switch rods are... was off, so they just reached up with their hands and pulled the rod and opened the door. Nothing really serious happened that night. I went home in the morning.

My wife came in, and she worked there also [at the prison], and then I got a call around 2:30 [p.m.] and was told to come in because they started fires in Mohawk ... or D Block. So, I went in there, and Capt. Kerry sent me over to K and J Block to make chow release, and we just started making releases, when the word came out to respond back because they were breaking out of their cells... because they were trying to have communication one and off during the day with inmates trying to get a settlement here and nothing was happening.

So, they end up... they broke out of the doors, and we... at the E Gate and we all took off running for the control desk. We got in there and got locked. Then they started breaking down the glass, and they had chainsaws and sledge hammers. The only thing we had were night sticks and old, out-of-date mace that was there. They lit mop heads and stuck them in the windows trying to smoke us out.

Then from there, it was Capt. Bowser and Capt. Kerstetter and Stotelmeyer all in the control desk, and they all squeezed through the key room window to go upstairs. Also, Cindy Fitzingo... she was there with us, and we all went upstairs and ... we weren't thinking, because you open the doors to go upstairs to the hallway... and we get up there and we decided to put desks across, from door to door, not realizing we had to pull the door open. So, the desks didn't do any good for us. We tried to keep Cindy out of sight, because we didn't want inmates to know we had a female up there with us.

McNaughton: Wow. How many were there with you?

Smith: About 25 or 30 [he starts naming people...].

McNaughton: At least 30 people... that's a lot.

Smith: Yeah. One inmate tried to stick his head in the doorway, and there was a softball bat at the door... I don't understand why it was up there... Sunday swung at him, and he ducked back in... then they started building fires around us.

If it wouldn't have been for the 8 or 9 state troopers that was around and Ebersole and his volunteer fire company... they got us out... on ladders. State police kept their shotguns handy so we could get released. We had no other weapons up there. They snuck one up there. Everybody took their belts off and made a long rope-like thing... and one shotgun was hoisted up.

The only thing I know is that after the shotgun was up there, me and Kerry hugged each other. I said, "What in the hell are you doing here, Joe? Why aren't you retired yet? You have enough years in." He said, "I should." It was an emotional moment. We both shed tears there for a while. I thought I was going to be dead or hurt bad...

McNaughton: So, you went down the ladder of the fire engine, or...?

Smith: No, they had this long extension ladder and we climbed down that. Then we all went to the main gate, and they checked us all out.

Then I went back inside... a couple of us went back inside. We got on the roofs of cell blocks A, B and C, to monitor the inmates out in the stockade field. We each had shotguns, and I stayed up there for a while. Then my legs started getting rubbery, and I came back down and that's all. That's about it.

McNaughton: That's it? That's a lot.

Smith: Yeah. I never ran so fast. I was 260 pounds then, and the only person ahead of me running was Lt. Renninger then. I had a big coat on, but I was catching him. They were busting out, breaking through the gate, and we just took off running. I had no other choice. There were probably a thousand or more inmates and a handful of officers ... maybe 6 or 7... we all just took off running.

McNaughton: Yeah.

Smith: We got to control there and locked the doors, but they were breaking in. The glass and mops on fire through the holes and trying to break down the doors.

McNaughton: That just had to have been completely terrifying. I just couldn't imagine.

Smith: I had two years in Vietnam. I was more scared then than I was in Vietnam, maybe because I had a rifle and stuff over there, but in here, you had nothing but a wooden night stick and out-of-date mace. It didn't do any good.

McNaughton: Then what happened? Did you go back to work the next day, or...?

Smith: Yes. I went back... I went home during the day. Slept that night and went in the next morning, and we went over to the stockade field. They had all of the inmates... I was there that night everything was coming to an end... with state police and the water cannon and everything. I think Joe Miller and Cooney went through the tunnel areas trying to see if they had inmates in

the tunnels. For that first night there were officers and inmates stuck on top of the gym on the room. They were helped down.

McNaughton: Right. I did talk to Gere Kostelac and he told me that story. He was one of the guys up on the top of the roof there.

Smith: I know the second night of the right, I don't know how true it is, but I was told this numerous time... when I was on the CERT team I ended up making enemies, because I had snitches that would... and when they went into K Block, they knew I came in that night, and they're searching all the cells looking for me, because they thought some of the inmates were hiding me in their block. They said there was a "hit list" found that night and [on that list] Renninger's name was first and mine name was second. I don't know if that list was ever found, but Renninger told me that, so I sort of believe that.

McNaughton: Tell me what led up to the riot. What had the inmates so angry?

Smith: I think it started because of something having to do with Family Days and then, also, they were going to start making them pay for their visits to the nurses or the doctors. If there was nothing really wrong with them, they were going to charge them two or three dollars. I know a month before that, I... while I was still 2-to-10 sergeant, I got information about something major was going to happen at Camp Hill. They were supposed to do it when they had the statewide track meet at our institution. There was supposed to be a fight started between a couple of inmates to get the guards attention, and then they would have someone they were going to hit – I don't know if it was an inmate or what – but I wrote like a four- or five-page report on that and I sent it to Deputy Smith, and nobody believed me until one of the inmates came down from Barber School and went back up to the Security Office and he told them the information that I said about the track meet. Then the other riot happened about a month later.

I don't know if it was all connected or not, but you know... I just made 6-to-2, so I was happy to be on that shift, because my wife worked 6-to-2, and we would both be home together. I was doing two different shifts – 6-to-2 and 2-to-10 there – we hardly saw each other.

McNaughton: Tell me what the rebuilding of the facility was like then. After they let the superintendent and deputies go... and Beard came in with Kyler and McCullough... how was the rebuilding of the facility?

Smith: I made lieutenant then, and they put me in charge of J Block. That was the second Mohawk, and they used it as the second restricted housing unit. There were chains on the cell doors where they couldn't... at times I'd get paranoid because they'd be making loud noises and banging their cells and stuff and I'd call up and say, "There's something going on." It was bringing back bad memories. They started tearing everything down, and it took a long time to get everything built back up the way it should have been... like it is now.

McNaughton: Right. And the state police were there for a long time too, right?

Smith: Yes. They were out in the stockade field there for a long time. We were doing 12-hour shifts for about a year. We'd go in there 6 o'clock in the morning, get home around 7 o'clock at

night, eat something, watch about an hour of TV, got to bed and get up and do the same thing. They started shipping inmates out by bus to other institutions... some to federal jails. That was... then they made me in charge of Mohawk, and started bringing inmates in, and I started recovering jewelry and stuff that was taken from other staff members... CL Miller's wedding ring and some other things. Then we had state police in Mohawk for a long time... or D Block, it's called Mohawk. There was a lot of tension there for a long, long time.

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

Smith: I was happy with the way the state police responded with their SERT team and the way the community responded... having trucks out there with coffee and pizza for everybody. The way the community just came and helped us and was there for the people who work at the jail. It's a hard job, and people don't realize that. You can't be scared to do the job. If you're scared, there's no use bothering walking in the main gate, because you're going to get yourself hurt or get other officers hurt. You just have to take it as it is. Be somebody that's fair. Me and Renninger worked J Block for a long time when I first started there, and there were only two officers with 80 inmates. We never had problems. If somebody gave me a problem, one of the tier runners would take care of it... they would take somebody out the back steps and beat them up and say, "Don't mess with this officer anymore." That's just the way it was. If they respected you and liked you, they had your back. As long as you treat everybody fair. That's the name of the game.

McNaughton: Even today... that would be the major advice that you would give to officers today?

Smith: Yeah. You can't go in there and be gung-ho and try to be a tough guy, because it's not going to work. You're just going to get yourself hurt... get other staff members hurt.

In reference to Beard and Kyler... When I was in J Block, every time Beard came in there and looked around, he'd ask me if I needed anything. I'd tell him when I think I needed something. The next day I had it. No problems asked. I really appreciated that. He... people said that he lied to them, but he never lied to me. Everything I ever asked for, he got. Three years later he walked into the dining room of kitchen 1 and still remembered me and...

I was amazed that Mayor Reed had the Harrisburg police officers over there... this was on the first night yet... and he came around and said he was here to help man the different areas outside the perimeter. He told the police chief, "You follow this sergeant here and you do what he tells you to do. No questions asked." I said, "Darn." Mayor Reed met me two years later at a ball game and said, "How you doing, Sergeant Smith?" That's the only conversation I ever had with him, and he still remembered me. That amazed me too.

Smith: That second night when they broke out... if it hadn't been for Sgt. Paul Beck refusing the commissioner's [superintendent's] orders not to open that gate to let the state police and the firemen in there to rescue us, we probably wouldn't have made it out alive. They had fires all around us and pretty soon they would have out numbered us coming through those doors,

because there was no way to block those doors... you had to pull them open, not push them in. There was no way we could have stopped that. Sgt. Beck saved a lot of officers' lives that night.

McNaughton: So, the commissioner did not want the state police to enter? Is that what you're saying?

Smith: Yes. Freeman... he said, "Don't open that gate." I didn't think a whole lot of Freeman. He wasn't the commissioner. He was the superintendent. I didn't think a lot of him. I'm sorry. It's my personal opinion ... even before the rioting happened.

McNaughton: Is there anything else you want to share?

Smith: No. I'm just happy nobody got killed. There were a lot of serious injuries out there on people's minds on this matter. I know there's more that happened to the male officer than there was publicized, and I can understand them not wanting to... I'm just happy. I'm glad no inmates were killed either, because that would have really been more headaches for the department.

McNaughton: Quite amazing.

Smith: If the people in the Bureau Building would stop sitting at their desks thinking how to do things better and come inside and work the jail and see what the officers' put up with, they might realize things different... instead of going to college and learning the type of information they teach you, then you... use that to do the job and understand what they need. You just can't implement rules and expect everybody to be alright with it.

McNaughton: Excellent. I want to thank you so much for participating in this project.

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