

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Tom Aaron  
Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots**  
Interview Date: August 19, 2019  
Interviewer: DOC Communications Director Susan McNaughton

**Interview Transcript**

**McNaughton:** Welcome to the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' Oral History Project where we work to 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, August 19, 2019, is Tom Aaron, who served as superintendent assistant at SCI Frackville.

Thank you for joining us, Tom.

**Aaron:** Thank you for talking to me.

**McNaughton:** Could you please begin by providing us with a brief overview of your DOC career – at which facilities did you work and what titles have you held.

**Aaron:** I began my career in 1985 at the Sharon Community Corrections Center. I was one of the center monitors there. In 1987, I took the position of superintendent's assistant and the opening of SCI Frackville. I was there until 1991, when I went and was on the administrative staff – a catch-all title of executive assistant to the commander at the Quehanna Boot Camp. I retired in 2007.

**McNaughton:** Where were you when the riot happened, and tell us what that day was like for you... how did it start, where were you and how did you become involved?

**Aaron:** It started on a Wednesday. On Thursday, it was the topic of discussion at Frackville. We got very little information outside of the fact that the institution at Camp Hill had been locked down. We probably were concerned that we might have to have inmates sent to us, because we knew there was some damage at the Camp Hill facility.

That Thursday night, around 6 o'clock, I got a phone call from a friend who was once a counselor at Frackville and he had taken a position with the Parole Board at Camp Hill. He called me at home and said, "Hey, Camp Hill's having a riot." I said, "Oh, no. That was yesterday." He said, "No." and he had me listen to the TV. Of course, the TV coverage was all about the second night riot.

So, I went down to Frackville. I called Frackville first, and let them know what was going on and they said that they had already been informed... that Frackville CERT teams were being sent to Camp Hill and Frackville was preparing for having inmates coming in.

I went down to the institution. Like all of the other institutions in the system, we were overcrowded to begin with, and the only place we could even put inmates would be in the gymnasium. We had very little supplies to be able to handle any number of inmates that might be sent to us.

I left Frackville at 1 o'clock in the morning, of course on Friday. The superintendent continued to brief the administrative staff of what he knew was going on, and we were planning on getting inmates and realizing that we would need an awful lot of outside help, and we didn't expect it to come from either Central Office or any other institution, because they, too, were under the belief that they may be getting inmates coming there.

That Friday evening, about 7 o'clock, the superintendent called me at home and said that I and two other staff members were being sent to Camp Hill as a relief group, and the plans were calling for three days.

We got to Camp Hill probably around 10 o'clock that night, and we had a brief meeting with the secretary [commissioner of corrections] and then we went to the command center in the Camp Hill facility.

**McNaughton:** Can I just interrupt you here. So, 10 p.m. on October 27 – the rioting was done. It was over by then, right?

**Aaron:** Yes. I went into the institution, and that was when I really started noticing that the staff were really burned out. I mean, there was no control at the front gate. People were coming in and out. They had no idea who was coming in and out. They didn't even know when they would be returning, because there were groups from some of the county facilities that had come in to help.

There was a lot of talk that we had to move those inmates who were still out in the exercise yard. So, there was a lot of talk about planning on how to do that.

It was interesting that ... there were these continuing reports that there was an inmate that was loose inside the institution, and the State Police had sent in one of their emergency teams – we called them “ninjas” because they were all dressed in this black uniform. I was going through the cellblocks in Group 2... those housing units were the least damaged and that was where we were planning on bringing the inmates off of the field. I had come up with the thought that the only way to clean out those housing units was to throw all of the property on the floor and bring skid-steers in and end up putting everything into the dumpsters. It was an idea that sort of caught on.

I was actually sent down there to help with the PIO [public information officer] function. It turned into much more than that. Like I said, we were tasked with coming up with a plan to move those inmates.

So, on Saturday morning, Camp Hill's PIO ... I briefed him and the DOC's press secretary over at Central Office about what had gone on that night.

One of the funny things that had gone on that night was the ninja story. With all of the reports of the inmate on the loose, these guys [the ninjas] were hiding themselves inside of various parts of the institution, and as I'm going through one of the cell blocks it was just the emergency lighting that was on, and I could see this pair of eyes looking at me. So, when I was done inside there, I just happened to say, "Have a good night, Trooper." He responded back. He never challenged me. He just kept on watching me.

It ended up there was no inmate on the loose. The only person who kept on seeing this individual was a state trooper who was outside the perimeter. They finally stepped to him, and he admitted he was making things up.

The Camp Hill PIO took me over to the superintendent's briefing that morning, and in addition to getting the inmates off the field, the plans were to start sending the inmates to different institutions. The superintendent was very concerned about the physical condition and mental condition of the staff, because, like I said, everybody was kind of burned out, and you even mentioned that in your narrative.

They said that they had made up rosters of the inmates they were sending to each of the institutions, and I had made the suggestion that, instead of sending that roster, to have the institution send back a list of who the inmates said they were. Because the Records Office was trashed. Everybody was just going on by recognition of the inmate... you know, this is who he is. That caused a slight problem that wasn't resolved until many months later. Pittsburgh, I believe it was, faxed back their list, but it was a written list and the fax machine cut off some of the names. So, there was... I think it was around five inmates that were not accounted for for some time.

One of my concerns when we got down there Friday night was the DOC's position that no inmates escaped. I had a concern about that because of the openness of the front gate... the fact that we knew there were inmates that had given their clothes to staff members, so the staff members would not be hurt. They [some of the inmates] thought the rioters would believe that they were fellow inmates. That was something that, when you had that list of five people missing and that Saturday night... you have to remember that we were there from late afternoon/early evening until the following day... and we were supposed to have 12-hour shifts, but they actually ended up being like 14, 16-hour days for us.

The Saturday night, the plans were made to clean out the cellblocks using the skid-steers and to move the inmates out.

There was one media representative who was causing problems... very aggressive, even tried to sneak their way in to the prison. I got a call... this person was somewhere around the institution, so I went looking for him. I didn't find him, but when I got back to the command center, there was a note that the Parole Board had called over and said that an inmate had escaped and was now in custody of the Reading Police Department. This was after midnight and there was nobody answering the phones at the Parole Board Central Office. So, I finally got a hold of a detective in Reading. I found out that, for some reason, the person they had in custody was using his cousin's

name and inmate number. The detective knew both of those individuals and assured me that the one they had in custody was not the inmate.

The next morning... this is now Sunday morning... the DOC's press secretary called over and said, "Get over to my office." I tried to tell him about the inmate incident, and he was obsessed with a TV report that had aired Saturday evening with video footage of inside Camp Hill and a silhouette of an individual wearing a Trooper's hat with the voice that was jumbled telling the story of what was inside the facility.

There was the press secretary of the State Police... he came over and we kept looking at this video. The PSP press secretary said it wasn't a trooper. It wasn't a trooper car inside the institution from which this video was filmed.

To make a long story short, we thought maybe it was first a fire truck, because we had this loose inmate report and fire departments had come in and put 55-gallon barrels of water on top of all of the manholes in case this inmate was using the underground utility tunnels for his movement. It ended up, actually, being that the video was taken from inside a garbage truck. Of course, the state trooper never existed it was all made up by the media.

I don't know if you remember, but the DOC press secretary at a follow-up PIO meeting had done a video with the whole coverage of media reports. Some of them were very inaccurate. We had reports that staff had been killed. That came about because the medical unit had set up a triage area outside Camp Hill's perimeter, and actually staff members who were laying down taking a rest were ended up... being called deceased. It was kind of weird because, of course, the media is a huge, competitive media market down there in Harrisburg.

Saturday night, by the time I got back on Saturday night, the cell blocks had been cleaned and the inmates were being moved into them. We were bringing in like 20 or 30 at a time using DOC staff and State Police mounted unit. I have to give the mounted unit a lot of credit, they really helped in controlling that inmate movement.

Once they got to the cellblocks, they were brought inside like four and six at a time. They were searched and then two inmates would be handcuffed together, and four inmates were put into a cell. Then arrangements had been made to get chains and padlocks. That's how we padlocked them and secured them into the cells.

I ended up getting back to Frackville probably early afternoon on Monday. We briefed the administrative staff on what went on over the weekend. Frackville never did receive any inmates from the rioting. I believe the ones that were sent out went to Pittsburgh, Huntingdon and Graterford on that Saturday.

There are a couple take-aways that I really remember.

One was PEMA ... Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency... They had a little office that they were manning outside the command center at Camp Hill. On Friday evening when we were discussing how we were going to secure the inmates in the cell blocks, the only way to lock them in would be to use a padlock. Of course, we had this discussion of where are we going to

get like 500 padlocks, and the PEMA folks were, sort of like, kind of ignored by the DOC and the State Police staff that were manning the command center for some reason. One of the PEMA representatives came back in and said, "Ok, we contacted Yellow Locks and they are going to turn all of their production into single-keyed padlocks and we should have them sometime within the next 24 hours." That happened. So, PEMA was a bigger help than what we thought they would be.

I can remember being very hungry. We had 12-hour days, and we would be chauffeured to different motels every night. Just didn't have a chance to eat -- outside of what was provided there. There was a fellow that had a pizza truck that made Domino's pizzas, and the only thing we could eat over our shifts was Domino's pizzas, and there were thousands of Lebanon baloney sandwiches that had been made, but they had been sitting out in the weather the whole time we were there. I have to tell you that in the almost 30 years since the riot, I only once tried a Domino's pizza. I probably will never have another one. I have never had a Lebanon baloney sandwich since then.

The fatigue level... You mentioned that Roger Baumgarten, in his narrative, talked about him having to deal with the escapes. Another one was Dennis Buterbaugh. Dennis was press secretary for a short period of time with the DOC, and he was a press secretary for DEP during the Quecreek Mine [incident]. I remember he was brought in to one of our PIO meetings, and he talked about how he had no help and he had to do that... handle the media all by himself for all those days that it took to get those miners out. So, I've always been, ever since then, an advocate of early sending of help to an institution that's having an emergency situation.

**McNaughton:** I know that when the riots started, everything was in such chaos that Camp Hill wasn't answering their phones and they transferred all of their phones to my office, my phone. I was getting calls in the Press office from reporters, family members of inmates and family members of staff. What we learned from that is we have to set up different phone numbers for those different groups of people to call, separate from the Press Office, because when those calls came in, everything stopped. In a matter of like three days, we received over 3,000 phone calls. That was initially very chaotic and crazy. It really was.

**Aaron:** Especially having an institution that is in a competitive media market. In my career I had two inmate escapes. They were both walk-aways. One was at Frackville, and of course, Frackville had heavy media coverage from the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre area. The day that inmate walked away, unfortunately for me but fortunate for them, it was a big media briefing at the Schuylkill Mall, which is just a mile away from the institution. So, within minutes after word got out that this inmate had walked away, Frackville was inundated with TV stations and the press, media.

The one at Quehanna, it had some media coverage from the print press, but very little from the TV side of it.

**McNaughton:** And I remember too that we had local media here and some national. The PIOs and the press secretary, eventually, would go out and do their briefings. But what I think people don't realize is that after that, when that's over and the press secretary would brief his deputy

press secretary what information he provided, he would then go on to see what happened since that briefing, but while he was doing that all of the other media who didn't come to the briefings was calling to find out what did he say. It was this constant outpouring of information at all levels – locally through briefings, over the phone. It just seemed to just never end.

**Aaron:** Its true, and the walk-away we had up at Quehanna ... there was really nothing to having the need for the press to be there. There was nothing to see. We could easily handle that by telephone calls or faxing news releases, but they would show up anyhow.

**McNaughton:** Back to the riots, what was happening in the field? Did you receive any notice that you should lock down Frackville? Did you lock down? There's always talk that when there's an incident like that it could be contagious. Were you told to watch the inmates... lock down? What was the order from Central Office?

**Aaron:** I don't recall being ordered to lock down. I do remember when I was there that Saturday evening through early Friday morning, there was a lot of hooping and hollering in the cells because inmates were watching the news about the riots.

**McNaughton:** At Frackville?

**Aaron:** Yes.

**McNaughton:** They [the inmates] clearly knew what was going on through the media coverage, which is something that we always tell our PIOs... you have to be very careful what information you release, because the inmates can watch TV.

**Aaron:** Oh, yeah. Yeah. That was the experience there.

**McNaughton:** Is there anything else that you want to talk about the riots that we might have missed?

**Aaron:** I have one other take-away. This ... it was socks.

**McNaughton:** Socks that you wear on your feet?

**Aaron:** Yeah. When we were told to pack for three days, I packed for more, but I didn't pack a clean pair of socks. The thing that got me was that I needed clean socks but there was no way I could wash them and dry them within the four or five hours that we weren't in the institution. So, to this day, every time I pack and go somewhere, I pack plenty of socks.

**McNaughton:** [Laughing] Because you never know.

**Aaron:** You never know.

**McNaughton:** Interesting. One take-away I got from it was you should always have food in your desk. I remember being so hungry and almost to the point of feeling like you were going to become sick. A staff member took me down into the Central Office kitchen where everyone was making those sandwiches that you spoke about. The only thing... I didn't like ham sandwiches. I didn't want Lebanon baloney. I just took a piece of bread and made toast, and I couldn't find butter. So, I ate dry toast. It worked, because I was starved, but yeah, so, my take-away is that

there's always got to be something in my desk – some sort of snack – because you never know... your work your full day... something kicks off at the end of the day, and you're working 12 hours.

**Aaron:** It was... I was so hungry on Sunday that ... I ended up at the motel I was staying at had a restaurant and I just had to go get something to eat. I remember that hamburger that I got was one of the best things I ever ate.

I happened to look over and sitting at the table next to me was a young lady who was a reporter for the Shenandoah Herald newspaper, which was a Frackville-area paper. She says, "What are you doing down here?" I didn't... the last thing I wanted to do was have some sort of inquiry of what I'm doing down here. So, I told her, and she said, "Well, I called off sick to spend a weekend with my boyfriend down in Harrisburg. If you don't tell that I called off sick to spend the weekend with my boyfriend, I won't say anything about seeing down here."

**McNaughton:** [Laughing] Oh, that's great. Oh my. Amazing who you run into in the middle of an emergency.

**Aaron:** Yes, it was.

**McNaughton:** Oh, Tom, it's been so great talking to you.

**Aaron:** It's so good to talk to you.

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