

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Dave Warren
Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots**
Interview Date: September 19, 2019
Interviewer: DOC Communications Director Susan McNaughton

Interview Transcript

McNaughton: Welcome to the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' Oral History Project, where we are recording the oral histories of individuals who were involved in an important DOC event. 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. Joining us today, September 19, 2019, is Dave Warren, who was with the Lower Allen Township Fire Department at the time of the riot. Thank you for joining us, Dave.

Warren: You're welcome.

McNaughton: Alright, Dave, it's 2:30/3 p.m. on Wednesday, October 25, 1989, where are you and what was your involvement in the riot?

Warren: I worked nightshift at that time for Capital Area Transit as a bus mechanic, and I woke up being dispatched to an incident at what that time we called SCIC, which stands for State Correctional Institution Camp Hill.

So, I responded and got there and found out there was some sort of fight that was involved. It escalated. We found out later that the inmates had taken over a good part of the institution and things were actually starting to escalate and burn.

At that time, I was an officer of the fire company of Lower Allen Township, which is our first due district. At that time, I was a lieutenant, and was met by police officers and several other folks. We weren't allowed to gain access to the institution because of what was going on there, so for several hours we were just in stand-by mode and being taken in to do what was needed, along with PSP and other law enforcement.

So, the first day we really didn't have a lot of involvement there.

After the inmates were secured back in their cells and to the modular housing units at the time, then we were taken in and put out a lot of the fires.

The second night is when it really got bad there. I got there and was at the front gate and found out that the inmates were one gate away from taking over the control center. I met with several PSP officers, and we came up with... devised a plan to get these folks out of the control center,

which would have been the building directly behind the main gate on the right side, sort of where the flag poles are today. What we did then... there were several firefighters with me. The police officers took off their ID. Two of them went in with us.

We put a ladder up, took an air conditioner out of a window. We stuck a water canon in the door, so anyone coming and going out that door would have been hit with a severe amount of water to deter any action that we were trying to help do.

As we got up the ladder, and we removed the air conditioner... there were several people inside the control center that needed help to get out. We brought them down the ladder and took them to the front gate entrance, where they were removed safely. Ironically, no one was hurt or injured.

One of the last persons I remember bringing down... I remember bringing him down, was a major... Major Stover. I remember bringing him down, and he didn't really want to come down the ladder. We had to bring him down head first, which was unique.

Then we disconnected our water line to the hydrant and let the hose lay there, because it was getting dangerous. They [the inmates] were throwing things at us. The police officers, who were our back up to help us, and then we got out. I pulled that off without... the fire chief at the time gave a direct order not to even go in there, but I figured, "I've got to get these people out of here. They're going to get hurt or killed." So, that's was one of the things I was directly involved with.

McNaughton: Wow. You placed your life in danger to help people whose lives were potentially in danger. Now, did you have any military background or law enforcement background, or was it just your firefighter background that was like, "I've got to get in there and help get these people out." What drove you?

Warren: Just firefighter background. I have been a firefighter for about 40 years, and to this day, I'm still the president of the fire chiefs' association in Cumberland County.

McNaughton: Once these people got out... then what happened?

Warren: We backed out through the front gate and regrouped. [We] figured out where these folks needed to go... whether they needed to be checked out medically or what. We took accountability of the folks that went in with us to make sure that everybody got back out safely.

Then that's when things really got bad. They [the inmates] were taking over and burning things.

We regrouped and went back in with another group of officers... law enforcement, and we were trying to take control of different areas.

Those modular housing units that they had built, they had several of those on fire at the same time. We were trying to put those out, which was a futile attempt, because the flames were just too large. We didn't have enough manpower or enough equipment to do that. So, it was decided... since no lives were in jeopardy, just to leave them burn and come back later to try to put them out.

Then, we got to the commissary/furniture factory area, and I was met with a state police officer... his name was Major Hazen. I remember him very well.

They a gate that was controlled... barricaded actually... with a lot of debris. They had some corrections officers on the other side of that gate. We were trying to find out if they were OK or to get them back to safety. The inmates actually had them as hostages.

We decided to use water cannons to try to knock some of the stuff down, but it was fortified too much. The water ended up bouncing off straight up in the air. So, that was a no-go on that. Then we met and regrouped.

Around daybreak is when they decided to take back control of the facility which was done at daybreak with two helicopters dropping tear gas. At the time, the major of the state police asked if I would crash a gate with our fire truck, and I said, "Well, the water cannon wouldn't knock it down. I'm sure I'm not going to be able to knock it down with a fire truck." So, I said, "There is one outside the institution that the Commonwealth owns, which went by Air Guard 704 – which is one of those large firetrucks that's used at the airport. So, they brought that in, and that's when they crashed the gates at daybreak and dropped tear gas from two helicopters and the inmates are running around. The order was given, "fire at will." I still remember to this day, and I was sitting on the roof of the fire truck watching, and I said to the one guy that was with me, "You'll never see this again as long as we're alive."

People were being shot. People were being injured. People were being beat. People were being hit with objects that were being thrown. I'm going to guess that it took probably less than an hour for the state police to take over of that area.

The inmates were brought out in handcuffs, some with hardly any clothes on... they were lined up along the fences where they were guarded and then transported away from that area.

Then we spent the better part of that day putting out fires and cleaning out cell blocks.

I was in there for about 72 hours. It was quite the adventure.



Lower Allen Township Fire Department

McNaughton: Wow. What I find very interesting is that... even 30 years later... your details are apparently very vivid to you. Your description was just impeccable.

Warren: It was an incredible three days. Through the whole process I wasn't really scared, because I was with law enforcement the whole time. They were heavily armed. If you stayed with them, you were safe. If you strayed from them, you were sort of taking your own life.

The problem with SCIC at that time was ... [the audio is garbled here] it was nice... they had the weather in their favor. There wasn't any rain. It wasn't real cold. The weather that day was in the 70's, and even at night it was in the 50's. A perfect situation for them.

McNaughton: Right. I was there and was watching out my office window. So, I had the perfect vantage point of the compound area between the six cell blocks, where most of this took place, but a lot of what you described took place on the other side of the barricades, which I couldn't see. So, I've heard other people talk about what you're talking about, and I'm just amazed because I didn't see it. It's an interesting vantage point, so I appreciate you for providing that. One thing I did want to mention was, the Correctional Industries building just smoldered and smoldered for many days afterward. Were you continually coming into the facility afterwards to kind of surround-and-drown that, or...

Warren: Yeah, we would basically bring crews in and rotate them out. We would leave firetrucks there... I think for the better part of a week... putting out spot fires, and then we would rotate crews out.

One of the things I remember is we would go on with these SERT teams. They would clear areas for us, and then we would go in and put these fires out. I remember operating a Bobcat, and anything [in the cell blocks] that we could push out into the corridors was pushed out, and then they had dumpsters for us to put it in. That would help us to keep the items from burning. It's hard to burn concrete and steel, but all the items in it would burn easily.

McNaughton: Did you say that you were operating one of the Bobcats, pushing that stuff out?

Warren: Yes.

McNaughton: I always presumed that that was just our DOC staff doing that. I know that they were involved in cleaning out the cells and dumping the stuff into the center of the cell blocks and then it was pushed out. So, you were driving one of those Bobcats.

Warren: Yeah. I was a bus mechanic for 33 years... I knew how to operate heavy equipment. Nothing to it.

McNaughton: Ok, let's talk about afterwards when things are finally over. Did your experience affect you in any way? Did you have nightmares or anything like that afterwards?

Warren: No. There was a lot of... the fire service has a lot of camaraderie in it, and there was probably fire departments from nine counties there for the duration. There was a lot of exchanging stories. A lot of exchanging of pictures. At that time camcorders were popular... not like the digital cameras today... so there were a lot of photographs that were taken that shouldn't

have been. I still have a live round that I kept as a souvenir ... it was out of a 12-gauge shotgun that I found laying on the ground. I kept it as a souvenir.

It was a traumatic experience for some. What you saw, you never think you'd ever see again, and truly hope nobody ever experiences that... They were actually, if I recall, one gate away from getting out of that place... which would have been down where the power plant is today. If they would have got through that gate, it would have been mass chaos, because you would have had people outside and you don't really know what would have happened then. There would have been a lot of people running like ants, I think.

McNaughton: Right. Tell me about the wear and tear on the fire department's equipment. How did it impact your fire department?

Warren: We had a lot of equipment that was damaged... that was irreplaceable... nothing large. It was all small equipment. Turnout gear was damaged. Hoses... breathing apparatus... that type of thing. A lot of it was replaced by insurance. We spent countless hours figuring out who lost time at work, so we could get reimbursed. There were various funds set up for that. I can recall being reimbursed for probably 24, 28 hours in the job that I worked for loss of wages.

McNaughton: People don't really think about that.

Warren: It was extensive to figure out the amount of manpower equated into hours and the hours equated into dollars. Everybody that was there, for the most part, were volunteers, except for Harrisburg City and the Airport. So, you're talking hundreds, if not thousands, of volunteer firefighters who gave up days of their lives to participate in all of this.

McNaughton: Have you ever experienced on that scale ever since?

Warren: No. Large fires, yes, but nothing like that, where you have multi agencies being involved. A lot of lessons were learned from that.

We have NIMS, which is the National Incident Management System. It became nationwide. We all had extensive training in it, and there are different phases that you go through now, but at least they learned how to do that.

The one problem we had at the riot was cell phones aren't like they are today, where you can... back then they had big, heavy bag phones, plus the portable ones. Radio communication was poor back then. To communicate with a police officer that might have been 10 feet from you was difficult at best. Everybody was on a different frequency. The Commonwealth has spent millions of dollars trying to have a statewide radio system, and I don't think it works right to this day. Everybody's tried...

McNaughton: What's Lower Allen Township Fire Department's relationship like now with the prison? Do you go over there for drills? Have you been in there since they've renovated it? Obviously, it's much different than it was back in 1989.

Warren: They do periodic exercises in there. I think they just had one recently... a mass casualty incident with law enforcement and fire department. So, they do training periodically,

and I can remember going in with a tower truck. ... We get to learn about the institution, and after it was rebuilt, we had several tours of the facility. I don't think whatever happened back in 1989 could ever happen again, but that's the old adage, What if?

McNaughton: Is there anything else you recall that you want to share before we close this interview?

Warren: I think looking back at it... I think a lot had to do with... the inmates were bored. There weren't enough jobs and things for them to do and they just got bored. When you get bored, you sit around, and you try to figure out what you can do to disrupt things, and they certainly did it.

McNaughton: Absolutely.

Warren: I do remember PSP Major Jim Hazen ... and he was a no holds barred kind of guy. He figured out what you needed to do, and he took control.

McNaughton: Your phone was going in and out a bit. Did you say the incident commander Glen Walp?

Warren: No. Jim Hazen. He was a major at the time. I remember him very well.

McNaughton: He's still around, but he doesn't want to do any interviews on it. I did try to reach him.

Warren: I don't blame him. There are things I saw that you just don't talk about. When you shoot somebody, they don't always get up and run from it.

McNaughton: Dave, thanks for taking time with us to share your recollections of this important time in our DOC history. We appreciate your participation.

Warren: You're welcome.

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