

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Nick Chimienti Jr.
Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots**
Interview Date: September 29, 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. Our guest today, September 29, 2019, is Nick Chimienti Jr., who worked for the Pennsylvania State Police at the time of the riot. Thanks for joining us, Nick.

Chimienti: Good evening.

McNaughton: As we begin this oral history, can you please tell me what your job was with the state police at the time and tell me when you first became involved in the Camp Hill prison riot.

Chimienti: At the time I was on the job for five years and I first started out in Avondale and I transferred to PSP York. I was stationed down at the York Barracks. At some point I went on the mounted team. I was into horses all my life. I used to work at Hershey Park years ago, and at the Hershey Stables, and they had horses there. So, I was kind of into horses and had a great opportunity to get on the mounted team.

McNaughton: It is Wednesday, October 25, 1989, at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon, where are you and what's happening?

Chimienti: I would have been stationed at York, and I want to say that at that time, I was already off duty and we all go these phone calls at home. I was at home, and the sergeant called in and said, "You need to come back to the barracks right away. There's a prison riot going on." We had no idea... there were no cell phones back then. So, I high-tailed it back to the barracks not knowing what I was about to get involved with.

McNaughton: And then what happened?

Chimienti: From that point, we get to the barracks, and they tell us, "The Camp Hill prison riots are going off. There's riots up there." I remember vividly jumping into a patrol car. I didn't drive. I can still remember sitting in the back seat... there were four of us. I just can't remember if we actually took... I think we did... we had helmets. We had old blue helmets, and all I had with me was that blue helmet and riot sticks and that was it. We didn't have any other gear, other

than our weapon. We responded. So, we're coming up [Interstate] 83. I just... I just... I just remember seeing... we're coming towards the exit, and we see this huge plume of smoke. We were like, "Geez, is that... that must be the prison." As we get closer, I will never forget that... I had an aunt that lived right there within one mile of the prison, and I felt bad for her knowing that the information we were hearing... there were possible escapes and everything, but as we got closer, then we started to see this glow. That's when we saw the fires. You know what, I might even be confused between the first night... no, that was the first night. I'm pretty sure of that, but I just was in awe of what was going on. It was just... I couldn't believe that that was on fire.

McNaughton: Right. So, it started around 3 o'clock, so it was still daylight probably by the time you arrived then.

Chimienti: Yeah, I would say that. I just... it's just sketchy.

McNaughton: I was just trying to help you... see if that helped you a little bit. You get there, and then what happens?

Chimienti: We get there. We form up, and there's a lot of... right at the gate, there's a lot of mass confusion. We're waiting for other troopers to arrive before we go into the prison. Like I said, I was a young trooper. I was only... I only have five years on the job. I considered myself at the time a tough guy, but I was looking at this going, "Is this really happening?" I just couldn't understand it.

At that point I remember going in as a group, and it was just total melee. I remember seeing some prisoners running around... some that weren't even rioting there, they weren't a part of it. They didn't know where to go.

McNaughton: Right. Because not everyone was involved in the actual rioting itself.

Chimienti: No. There was... as you well know, there was only a certain percentage of them... and those certain percentage were mostly still inside raising hell.

McNaughton: I think, with the state police, the DOC staff was working to try to contain everything over to the one side of the institution. I guess everyone was pretty much successful doing that. What happened, then, once you were inside the institution?

Chimienti: I also remember vividly being very close... I guess they lit on fire the... there were like trailers... I think they used them for classrooms. I'm not sure what they were for. It was like 10 of these kind of portable-type buildings, and those were on fire. *[NOTE: These modular buildings weren't set afire until the second night of rioting.]* We were outside there. I can still remember to this day the noises and the gas sounds of things exploding inside. I don't mean like anything... just the pops of the intense fire. At that point, I ran into... I have an uncle that's on the job... Trooper Pete Chimienti... and he was stationed at Troop J. Next thing you know, there's another platoon going by us, and they were from Troop J, and they ended up assigning this platoon to work with our platoon. It was kind of cool that I got to meet up with my uncle,

who was a seasoned trooper. It was almost kind of comforting to me to know that he was there by my side. We got to work together for the rest of that night.

McNaughton: What did your two troops do together then?

Chimienti: We were told to secure the one side of the prison. I can't remember what block it was. There were inmates yelling out the... some were trying to surrender. They were holding out their shirts, and we were just containing that area from anybody getting out from that area. Meanwhile you had, literally, these portable buildings on fire... fully engulfed... and we were like, "Are they putting these out? What are they going to do?" We're talking amongst ourselves. There was just too much going on. There was no intention of any of that kind. At that time, it was just total chaos.

McNaughton: Total chaos. That's exactly how a lot of people explain it and describe it.

Chimienti: I remember one guy, and this guy was almost surrendering, and I felt bad for the guy. The guy... all he had on was just his underwear. I remember my uncle going over to him and trying to help this guy out. The guy wasn't rioting as far as we knew. They took this... I'll call him kid... and took him into custody and he got shuttled away. I think at first, nobody knew what part this guy did, but it was obvious to him that he wasn't one of the rioters. Again, I'm sure it was very bad for the inmates that were in there that weren't part of the riots.

McNaughton: Right. There was mention that a lot of them did try to separate themselves from the others. They would just go and sit in one of the yards and stay out of the way. What was the rest of that night like for you?

Chimienti: There's not much more that I can remember other than just... one of the things that I still vividly remember... when these places were burning, there was like... the insulation up in the ceiling of it... there was nowhere for us to go. We were almost comforted by the warmth of it, because it was a little chilly. I remember looking at them going, "Wow, look at those colors." It was just a weird thing to observe. We're sitting there watching and waiting, making sure nobody else is getting out, but right to the right of us... 10 yards away is this unbelievable fire. We knew there was nobody in these pods. I think they were called pods.

McNaughton: We called them modulars.

Chimienti: Modulars... yeah. I guess, because of the material that it was made out of, it was just like blues and yellow and red color. It was the craziest thing to see.

McNaughton: That night ends. When did you... did you go home?

Chimienti: That night ends. We were there for a while. It's... I didn't even know until I found out about this whole thing... it's 30 years ago?

McNaughton: 30 years, yep.

Chimienti: That's pretty amazing. It doesn't seem like that. There are certain things I can remember like yesterday, but, yet, it's fuzzy as to how long we were there that night. I was at

York... it wasn't very far. We were there for a while. I do remember it being over. They told us it was over, and they were all contained. We were no longer needed, so we got shipped back.

McNaughton: Right. So, you probably just went to work the next day for your normal shift?

Chimienti: I don't remember.

McNaughton: Oh, ok.

Chimienti: I don't recall that part. I just don't.

McNaughton: You might have been sleeping. You might have slept in most of the morning, because everybody was really tired.

Chimienti: You're probably right.

McNaughton: Then the next night at around 6/6:30 [p.m.], the inmates broke out again, and this time it was even worse than the night before. Tell me what your involvement was with it the second night.

Chimienti: The second night, when we first heard this, we were all in disbelief. We couldn't believe that that was taking place. We thought that everything was secure, and it was all done. Well, then I got a call from up at the [PSP] academy, being a mounted team member, and I was one of six that was on the mounted team. I will never forget to this day, I remember getting ribbed... guys busting my chops for being on the mounted team, because you'd go away for training or we were in a lot of parades. We do a lot of stuff like that... community relations stuff. This one trooper would always bust my chops saying, "Ah, what do the horses do? What do you guys do? They're not good for nothing. I don't know why we have these things." I'll never forget, and he won't either. He knows who he is. I think he retired... I never forget him coming up to me there when I was on horseback when we finally at the end shuttled all those prisoners... I think we had 1,200 or 1,400 prisoners out in the yard. Six of us could move a lot of people. I'll never forget him coming up to the back of me and saying, "Man, I'm glad you guys are here. I can't believe you moved all those people like that." He felt very secure, because he knew these horses were trained and we could move a lot of people. The inmates were scared to death of those horses.

McNaughton: That's what I was going to ask you was, do you recall when you were first entering the scene, that the reaction of the inmates were to the horses?

Chimienti: They... when we came in, it was immediate. They didn't mess around with any of them. At some point they would direct us to move... we'd escort large amounts... large groups of inmates, and but I do remember at the one point once we had all them out in the yard and they were getting a little crazy... we had to put a certain amount up into one of the corners. Six horses could move a couple hundred guys very easily. They wanted no parts of those horses. You know, you're talking about huge horses, and they were definitely afraid of them. They were.

McNaughton: Is that how you spent the majority of your time then...

Chimienti: That night there, I want to say that was the night that we spent 28 hours in a saddle. So much that when I went back later after we took our first break to go home and sleep... that first night we spent 28 hours in a saddle. You just came out to eat or to go to the bathroom. I actually had saddle sores from the underwear that I had on. When I knew I was going back into it, that hurt so bad from peeing, and I know it sounds crazy... I actually went... they didn't have this kind of stuff... I cut a pair of long underwear off and used it, because it was smooth in the back and it didn't rub into your butt. That's what a couple of the other guys did too.

McNaughton: Had that been the longest amount of time that you'd spent in a saddle?

Chimienti: Yeah. I don't think anybody ever did that. You got off and it just felt good to get off the horse. Those horses were crucial. I didn't even realize so much our capability until we had to do what we had to do.

McNaughton: During those 28 hours in the saddle, everything came to a conclusion with the state police's assault back on the institution...

Chimienti: It would have, and one of the other things I remember vividly is that... and that would have been once we had control... when I was up there a few days later... second or third day after that where we were just guarding that area, but it got very, very cold at night. We were comfortable, but you had all of these inmates. I'll never forget, they had the clothes on their back... that's all they had. They brought in all these tarps to cover them, and it was just a surreal picture to see all these inmates laying on the ground and it just looked like one big blob of everybody covered with all these tarps.

McNaughton: It must have looked like a bunch of body bags.

Chimienti: It did. That's exactly what it looked like. Like a dark grey... colored tarps and they were using them as blankets. There was a lot of issues going on. They had to go the bathroom... we didn't have any of those port-a-potties were brought in until later. They had no food. That would have been the same for us too. There was no food for us right out the gate. The logistics and the other stuff that was going on, on the backside, that we weren't aware of had to have been pretty tedious also. Trying to feed X amount of troopers that were there to get them water and whatever we needed, let alone the inmates.

McNaughton: Exactly. I think I read in my research that, just for state police alone, there were probably about 800 of you there. You can add on top of that all of the fire fighters, EMTs and local police and then DOC staff, so there were a lot of people to feed.

Chimienti: And I'll tell you, it was an instant brotherhood too. It's just something I can't explain. I remember that too, just an instant brotherhood between DOC and the state troopers and the firemen. Everybody just worked together, and as you know, it worked out well as far as us taking back over the prison.

McNaughton: Yes, and thank goodness. What happened after the prison was taken back and the next couple of days after that? How were you used on the horse?

Chimienti: We would have been there for regular patrols, and helped move large groups of prisoners back into cell blocks once they got those all cleaned up and searched.

McNaughton: I think I've seen some pictures where moving them back into the cell blocks, the inmates were in single file and there was a horse in the front and a horse in the back. I think that's kind of how it appears that they were moved.

Chimienti: I don't... that doesn't. I don't recall any single file. I remember large groups of inmates with DOC and troopers to the fronts and sides and we rode alongside of them. They knew they weren't going to go anywhere at that point.

McNaughton: I have a crazy question about the horses. How did you feed the horses during all of this?

Chimienti: We had an old truck that, apparently, they used to use that for the rodeo years ago... they had hoses to get the horses water. They brought in buckets at some point, and when I say buckets I mean big barrels, and they filled those up. They had trucks there... I just don't remember me bringing in hay for them to eat or grain that they had, but they... I just don't recall. I do remember them bringing hay in for the horses. They needed to get taken care of also.

McNaughton: What else do you recall from the riots that you'd like to share?

Chimienti: I do know that I volunteered for almost however long we had that... how long did the state police have that... a year afterwards?

McNaughton: I believe so. At least.

Chimienti: I would have had a whole year of going up there. I always volunteered to go up there, and I would work the 12-hour shifts. You stayed at the little hotel right there off of 83. I still remember going in there... One thing that stuck out in my mind once we took that back over was the smell. It was a distinct smell that you can't... I can't describe. When I went back in later to another state prison... it just has that distinct smell. The kitchen area... at first troopers were going in and they had inmates in there cooking. I just never... I wouldn't eat it. I didn't eat it. I didn't trust what was going on. I had heard some things that some of the inmates were doing to the food once they knew that they were actually preparing food for the troopers. I just... I wasn't going to do that. They ended up bringing us food in there, and then we were able to pack stuff to bring in.

McNaughton: Like you said, the state police were there for quite a while. I know that I talked to a number of people including...

Chimienti: Right, and we were just young guys working because we wanted to do it. You got overtime for it. If you wanted to work, if you worked it. You had some of the older guys [troopers] thinking, "Oh, this is a great detail." They're going to add that to their pension. The old timers, kind of, laughed at the younger guys... I get it, they were taking that detail for however many times they could to bump their pension up.

McNaughton: Eventually, they slowly phased the state police out. Instead of being in every cell block, they would move them to a certain place within the facility. Then outside the facility, and then ... and this is over a period of time... and then they were released.

Chimienti: I want to add... I made that statement about the guys working overtime. I'm calling them the old timers and now look at me... I'm one of the old timers, but I made that statement about them making overtime working... they worked for every penny of that and they deserved every penny of that, because there's not many people that took the step toward danger. I didn't mean that disrespectfully in any way. How many careers where part of your job is to run towards danger, not away from it?

McNaughton: Exactly. We're thankful that you guys were there. Is there anything else that you'd like to share?

Chimienti: I remember, in one of the blocks, I remember seeing this sign and it... I always asked about it years ago. There was a sign inside of D Block, and apparently D Block was the most incorrigible inmates of the prison, but I'll never forget the sign there. It said, "What Goes Around, Comes Around." That never went out of my mind. I remember seeing that sign.

Another story was that I was working with my uncle and the DOC, when we were working with them and we were walking the blocks, they would tell us, "Hey, make sure you're walking on the outside of the walls, because they're going to throw... they were throwing urine on us. They were throwing feces on us. So, we did. It stank. I still remember. I didn't get any thrown on me, but I was very cautious walking the halls.

I'll never forget there was a kid in there, and we didn't have our nametags on. This kid had his back against the bars and he had both of his hands up behind his head, and he was doing like sit ups... just doing exercises... pulling his knees up to his chest, almost doing like an L-seat like a gymnast would. This kid was ripped, and he said, "Hey, trooper, are you two brothers?" We looked at each other and went, "Wow." We weren't brothers, but it was cool that he knew that we were family members. We talked to him a little bit about it. I don't recall the conversation. It was funny to us that he noticed that we were related.

McNaughton: Well, that's very interesting, and that shows how observant inmates are. They watch everything that is going on. They are there for 24 hours. Our staff are only there for about 8 hours, so yes.

Chimienti: Yes, they didn't miss a trick. I apologize I can't remember anything else.

McNaughton: That's ok. I want to thank you so much for participating in our project.

Chimienti: I just... something as you said that... I was on horseback and there was a guy with a t-shirt on and this was... I can't think of the name of the group... but it was some kind of a rap group... their logo was the inside of a scope targeted on a cop. It was like a cop killer, you know? This guy had one of those t-shirts on...

McNaughton: ... an inmate?

Chimienti: An inmate. He didn't have... where he would have gotten it, I have no idea, but he had it on. He was causing trouble, I forget what the story was with him, but we ended up jamming him up against... two horses had him in between us, and I grabbed onto the back of that shirt... I grabbed the back of that t-shirt and ripped the whole back part of it straight up. I had the whole piece all intact. I've had it for years. I don't know...

McNaughton: I was going to say... is that your souvenir?

Chimienti: I had that for years. Somebody explained to me later... they said that guy supports killing cops wearing a shirt like that. How the heck he would have gotten that in there, I have no idea.

McNaughton: they used to allow outside clothing, and I think the inmates were allowed to wear it in the evening. Who knows. Why that back then anyone would let that kind of a shirt in... I don't know.

Chimienti: It was a picture like almost as if you were looking through a rifle scope. It was trained right on the police officer.

McNaughton: You're going to have to find that.

Chimienti: I have no idea what took place with that, but I do remember that vividly.

McNaughton: Great stories. Is there anything else that you want to share?

Chimienti: I don't think so. I thank you so much. I'm very humbled to get the call and to do something like this.

McNaughton: Well, thank you very much.

END