

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Gregory White and Charles Zimmerman
Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots and Bringing SCI Waymart into Operation Early Because of the Riots**
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Interviewer: DOC Communications Director Susan McNaughton

Interview Transcript

McNaughton: Welcome to the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' Oral History Project where we are working 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 and also the opening of the State Correctional Institution at Waymart. Our guests today, August 30, 2019, are Greg White and Charles Zimmerman. Thanks for joining us.

Greg White Employment History: I started back in 1976 at SCI Rockview. I worked there for 10 years as a corrections officer, sergeant and lieutenant, and left in October 1986 to take the position of chief of security/fire and safety at the central office of the department. I worked there a little more than three years, and was then reassigned as deputy of operations at SCI Waymart, which was still, at that time, Farview State Hospital. Then I worked there until 1993, at which time I was promoted and moved to SCI Pittsburgh as superintendent. I worked there for three years as superintendent. I then moved to SCI Greene as the deputy of facility management. After two years there, I went to SCI Greensburg as deputy of facility management, and ended my career opening SCI Pine Grove as deputy of facility management. I retired in 2001.

Charles Zimmerman Employment History: I started transferring from Ohio State Correctional Institution in Lebanon, Ohio. I came in as the deputy superintendent for treatment at SCI Pittsburgh. After five years there, Commissioner Robinson appointed me as the first superintendent of the State Regional Correctional Facility (now SCI) at Mercer, which we opened. After a couple of years there, Commissioner Marks asked me to take over at SCI Huntingdon, where I was a superintendent for three years. Following that, Commissioner Jeffes asked me to go to Graterford, and I was a superintendent at Graterford from 1983 until 1989. At that time, Commissioner David Owens asked me to open up an institution in Waymart, Pa., the former Farview State Hospital. We would take over the hospital and convert it into a correctional facility.

McNaughton: Tell me where you were on Wednesday, October 25, 1989, and tell me about that day... where were you, how did the riot start and go from there.

Zimmerman: Wednesday is a day that I remember very little of. What I do remember ... there was a one-day riot and then there was a wardens conference ... the fall wardens conference was in Greensburg, but I thought it was Thursday, Sue, so if it started Wednesday, I'm a little foggy on that. But after the first day we had mixed signals about what was going on and there was some discussion about having to secure Camp Hill and holding a shakedown and things of that nature going around. We still went to the wardens conference. I remember I was there and I'm pretty sure that most of the superintendents were there, except for possibly Supt. Freeman. We were in another room... I think a hospitality suite... and we heard that there was a riot at Camp Hill, and the discussion was... "no, that was last night." Then further discussion came out and said, "Wait it's on TV." We went to one of the rooms that somebody was occupying and we saw Camp Hill on TV burning. Finally, we came to the realization that no, that's happening now. So that was a shock. And all of the state superintendents started heading back. Most went to their home facilities. I got into my car and started driving to Camp Hill. Here my memory is a little foggy, because if you had asked me this before I talked to Greg, I would have said Greg and I drove back there... I'm pretty sure somebody was with me. It wasn't Greg. If you are talking to anybody and they said they rode to Camp Hill with me, let me know who it is, because I'm really curious.

McNaughton: Greg, was that you?

White: No. I was already.... I stayed at Camp Hill after the first night.

McNaughton: Right.

White: So, it wasn't me.

Zimmerman: Anyway, I remember talking about the fact that we could travel at a fairly good rate of speed because most of the state police would be at Camp Hill. So, we drove a little bit faster than normal. I remember coming... we kind of came over the hill into Camp Hill and we thought, "My God, it looks like a moonscape." Because of all the state police cars that were there with their little bubble tops.

We came into Camp Hill and I immediately went into Central Office to see what we could do. There was really not much activity at Central Office at all and we saw Camp Hill actually burning in the background. We talked about my going down to see if I could help Supt. Freeman, but I was told I wouldn't be able to do that. At that point, I was just kind of hanging out at Central Office and being very frustrated because we could see a lot of problems at Camp Hill, but were unable to really do anything at that time. From there it goes into the evening hours, and I guess the next time, when Greg came back up... When did you come back up, Greg, did you come back up that night or was it the next day?

White: That evening.

Zimmerman: That evening. We spoke that evening, and the Commissioner didn't tell us to go to Waymart that evening, did he or was it the next day? I thought it was that night.

White: At about 7 in the morning, he told us, I think it was. As soon as the inmates started giving up, he called us up.

Zimmerman: Then we started on our trip to Waymart. One other thing I'd like to refresh my memory [asking Greg] do you remember where we stayed that night or were we at Central Office the whole night?

White: I was at the command post at Camp Hill all night, so, I don't know where anyone was.

Zimmerman: Ok. One of an aside here, as a personal note. We were together as families... the superintendents and their wives.... and my wife called Diane [Freeman] at the time during the riot, and she was very frustrated because she was separated from the children. I think she was in the house maybe and the children hadn't come home or something or couldn't get home or something like that.

McNaughton: Oh.

Zimmerman: But I don't know if she would have a memory of that, but I could call her [Chuck's wife]... so that's my memory of Camp Hill, unless somebody has something else to contribute.

McNaughton: I think that's good, but let's talk about how you and Greg... your team was put together and you were just normally planning to open the institution at Waymart. When were you supposed to be doing that, and then talk about how that was pushed into activation early?

Zimmerman: We had a timeline of about four weeks, didn't we Greg, following that initially?

White: Yeah, initially we were to get up there, get some staff, get a work cadre of inmates and then sort of sometime after the first of January start taking other inmates... something like that.

Zimmerman: So, it was more than a couple of weeks, it was several months.

White: Yeah.

Zimmerman: And then I remember the commissioner saying, "Get ready to open up tomorrow."

White: Yeah, I remember he looked at us and said, "Greg, Chuck, go to Waymart and be ready to take inmates tonight."

Zimmerman: Right. That's right. So, we went up and identified one housing unit, I guess, where we could start housing them. Do you remember which one that was, Greg?

White: Uh, E?

Zimmerman: I'm thinking E.

White: I think E. It was... but it had individual rooms or cells with wooden doors, but none the less it was pretty secure. The only thing was... it was filthy.

Zimmerman: Right. We had a heck of a time We had to really start cleaning up from scratch. We really... it was assholes and elbows all over the place. [Laughter] Excuse my French.

McNaughton: And so, the inmates you were getting were direction from Camp Hill?

Zimmerman: Yes.

McNaughton: And of course, the accountability was bad because of the records office being inside the institution and suffering some damage. So, how did you ensure you were getting who you were getting? And, of course, they were coming from a facility that wasn't clean any more so...

Zimmerman: They came right off the yard. We really didn't know, for sure what we were getting. Chip in, Greg.

White: Yeah, and they had nothing. They had nothing but the clothes on their backs.

Zimmerman: That's right. We had to give them toiletries, toothbrushes... all kinds of stuff.

White: And we didn't have them [the toiletries], we had to take them from Farview.

Zimmerman: Right.

McNaughton: So, for the people who are going to be listening to this in the future... SCI Waymart was a part of ... a section of the old Farview State Hospital which now is the entire SCI Waymart.

White: Yes

Zimmerman: That's correct. It was still Farview State Hospital, actually, and we just occupied a part of it, and Farview still occupied a part of it.

McNaughton: Was the Farview staff... were their kitchen staff working to feed the inmates you got now, and how did you cooperate and get all of the inmates what they needed – with the care, the food and the toiletries... You must have relied heavily on the Farview staff.

Zimmerman: We did for supplies. As far as cooking... didn't we have our kitchen open pretty soon?

White: Pretty soon, we did. I'm trying to think about what the timeframe was. We got Gary Davis as the culinary manager, and most of his staff... he came from Dallas, I believe.

Zimmerman: Didn't Frank Kosinski come with him?

White: Well, Frank came a little while later, because we did have a food service manager from Farview that I subsequently fired. Most of the food service staff were from Farview, but they started working for the department pretty soon. Sue, it's a blur as to how we did that. We did basic training on site in one of the closed housing units at Farview.

Zimmerman: That's right. I remember that, yeah. We had to train the... what did they call them... infirmary supervisors or something?

White: Psych

Zimmerman: PSA's

White: PSA's, yeah.

McNaughton: So, they were trained to become officers?

Zimmerman and White: Yes.

White: They were already in the H1 Bargaining unit so for them classification wise it wasn't a change. But there were little nuances like the security people that did the outside security – they were not H1 ... they belonged to a different union, and H1 didn't give a damn about them. Frankly. But we went to bat and got them to come on as trainees so they wouldn't lose their jobs.

Zimmerman: That's right. I tell you. It's foggy, Sue. I'm trying to get my memory going on this whole thing... the details... I'm glad I could bounce this off of Greg. It's helpful.

White: And there were some crazy things, Sue, like Farview still had this commissary where they would take their patients and they would get milkshakes and things like that from commissary. One time, one of our sergeants was walking by there with a couple of inmates and the one patient from Farview pulls back to take a swing at him, and this sergeant got him first. We weren't sure how that was going to work. [laughter] We had control of the perimeter pretty quickly, and one of the patients of Farview's had a visit from his brother and while sitting there waiting for his brother he goes wiggling out and we ended up having to restrain him and call the police. There wasn't a manual for that.

Zimmerman: Do you remember how many CO's we had, Greg, that first night when we first opened? I know we took... we handled the perimeter immediate, didn't we?

White: Yeah. We took the perimeter right away. I know that we had one officer ... he worked more than 24 hours straight, and he told me, "This isn't bad. I did this all the time in the Marine Corps."

Zimmerman: Remember we were scratching for personnel from the DOC.

White: Yeah, and we were making promotions on site.

Zimmerman: Yep. And also, they had an artificial type of security there. That front gate was not secure at all, if you remember.

White: Oh, yeah.

Zimmerman: I guess we established security with our personnel.

White: With our personnel and then... even some of the places they thought were secure...

Zimmerman: ... were not. So, we didn't have a physical plant at all that was suitable, but with the personnel we got, the small cadre of men we started with, we managed to make it secure... personnel as opposed to with a physical plant or a wall or a fence or gates for that matter.

White: Pretty early on we inherited the maintenance staff. Overall, they turned out to be really, really productive.

Zimmerman: Yeah, they were pretty good.

White: We rebuilt a lot of that space ourselves with in-house inmate labor and the maintenance staff. I look back on that and I still can't believe we did that much.

Zimmerman: The one thing that I noticed, Sue, in traveling to the different institutions... when you were in a rural area, those maintenance men were really good workers, and it was true at Huntingdon, it was true at Waymart. I mean, it was just amazing the work that they do. They work a lot smoother, a lot quicker, and they were a lot more effective than when we were near a big city.

McNaughton: Back to your first group of inmates... how many did you first receive?

Zimmerman: 200...

White: 37 maybe or 57.

Zimmerman: I was going to say 247. Somewhere in around that neighborhood. It was close to 250.

McNaughton: And you really just didn't know if you were getting somebody that had been sitting in the yard or ... it wouldn't have been somebody actively involved because... like the instigators, because they were kept local for court purposes, but you still could have had some people that were... could be problematic for you. How did you even prepare for that?

Zimmerman: Absolutely, we did. We just figured all of them were unknown quantities.

White: Yeah, and we did have a couple they later identified as being involved, that we had to isolate right away and put in one of those goofy rooms until we could get rid of them.

Zimmerman: Right. We all did ... they all did a good job. I'm saying the staff on hand did a really good job.

White: Chuck, I was telling her earlier how the inmates hadn't been out to the main yard from the end of October until March until they got out in the main yard.

Zimmerman: Yeah, that's right.

McNaughton: Did you ever have any major problems with those inmates? Did they grieve because they weren't out until March... how were they?

Zimmerman: No. As I recall they were thankful.

White: Yeah. For the most part they were thankful because they knew what they had gotten through and we treated them like men. We made sure they were treated fairly, and overall the inmates weren't as much of a problem as it was getting all of the stuff done with Farview.

Zimmerman: Right. It was... we used the old term "firm but fair." They were treated fairly, as Greg said, but we were firm about it and they knew their limits and they respected that... the situation, plus the fact that they were grateful to be off that yard and all of that discomfort they suffered for the night and everything else until they got up to see us. That's a natural human reaction.

McNaughton: How soon after opening were you able to allow them to have visits?

Zimmerman: I don't remember.

White: We had to rehab a place to do that. I would say it was a month and a half.

McNaughton: But they were understanding, right? Because, they knew...

White: Yeah.

Zimmerman: Yeah, they got a little impatient as time went on. You know... about what you'd expect, Sue. When they first got in there, they were very happy, and as they got settled in and they got more comfortable, then they said, "Hey, I want my visit," and all this kind of stuff. Just about what you'd expect, but for the most part, if it was six weeks, they handled it pretty well.

White: It may have not been... yeah, I think it was that long. I think our goal was to make sure they had visits by Christmas or something like that.

McNaughton: Crazy times. If you could pick a couple of the major problems you had to handle... besides opening it up in a hurry... what kind of things would you pinpoint?

Zimmerman: Well, the first thing that happened was we had a blow out driving up there. That was our first obstacle.

McNaughton: Ok, once you got there what was the next first obstacle?

White: We had to start using our staff that we didn't know and trying to make sure that they didn't overreact, trying to make sure they were... because we just didn't know them. We didn't know really who they were. A couple of the officers that had been around we knew a little bit of, but overall, we did not know people. And then we had to start interviewing. We had a list of people that Farview was keeping and the ones that they weren't, and we were sort of tasked with making sure as many as possible... of the ones that did not have a position with the Department of Welfare... still had a job of some kind.

Zimmerman: That was a long struggle, that was. That went on for a while. With the unions and the two different bargaining units, as I recall. The PSAs and the COs, right?

White: And the nurses. At Farview the nurses had a lot of options, and they didn't like giving that up much, and they treated the doctors like God, and frankly, they weren't.

Zimmerman: Right. When you mentioned about being careful that staff didn't overreact, I know on one occasion at least walking in on a situation and I have to say that they immediately straightened up as soon as they saw me. There was a tendency, given a history of where the inmates came from and all of the rumors going around, that some of the officers that we had might have wanted to be a little more aggressive than they should have been. They did respect me once they saw me come in, and I got to say that about them. They straightened up.

McNaughton: Good. Tell me one or two of the, again, beside opening up the facility in such a hurry, that you talked about the difficulties, name one or two successes that you remember, besides everything.

Zimmerman: Getting that first housing unit opened and securing the inmates was the first thing. That was phenomenal I thought. Getting it cleaned up, because there was no way that facility... that was an abandoned area that Farview abandoned some years ago and we were kind of robbing Peter to pay Paul. The maintenance staff would go to different parts of the institution and rip stuff out and put it in here.

White: I remember they had this one administrator at Farview, and she would try to keep track of how much stuff the DOC was using that was DPW stuff. She gave me a bill one day for, I think, it was \$420,000. I told her, "That's nice, and yeah, we probably did take all this stuff, but our department's the one that's under a state of emergency and not yours."

Zimmerman: That issue came up the first couple of months... Farview was used to operating with a small population of patients, they called them. And we of course are used to operating with very large number of inmates. They kind of had a mentality of counting thumbtacks, and it just was like... we didn't have time for that, we just had to get a job done. So, we just went ahead and did the job and there was a lot of frustration on the part of a lot of Farview staff. I know there were many, many meetings I had with the superintendent of Farview. The first one was Wendell Hunt. He wasn't there long and then Catherine...

White: ...Reese.

Zimmerman: Cathy Reese. That's right. We had to do a heck of a lot of negotiating back and forth because for the first more than a year or two, there were two superintendents and one facility ... they had squatters' rights, so to speak, and we came in and kind of like said, "Hey, we have to do this, and we're gonna do it." So, it was very interesting... the times were.

McNaughton: Kind of a merging of cultures.

Zimmerman: Yes.

White: I'm not sure a merging is the right...

McNaughton: A takeover?

White: One was sort of eliminating a culture actually. Even the psych security aids that became officers, they were used to different things like... at corrections... on your lunch hour, you're at

the institution. Where they could leave the institution... it was nothing for them to run down the hill, have two beers and come back to work.

McNaughton: Wow.

Zimmerman: That stopped when we got there.

McNaughton: Looking back now what different would you do?

White: We got a pretty good slug of money from Casey... he had that money that he was going to reduce property taxes or something, then he decided to fight drugs... and he decided Waymart would be a good place to fight drugs, and we got a pretty good slug of money there. We put in an RHU in a courtyard by lifting everything over a corridor... an enclosed corridor... it was amazing to see.

Zimmerman: It was kind of like, Sue, if you were to put an RHU between cell blocks in Graterford.

McNaughton: Right. And you had to crane the stuff over to get to the area.

Zimmerman: Exactly.

White: Including the crane.

Zimmerman: They were pre-fabbed, hard cells that we put together in that area.

White: It got to be... when I went back after I had been away for a few years... the one lieutenant came up to me and said, "Look at this, Dep, the floors are still clean enough to eat off." We got... everybody bought into what we were trying to do there.

McNaughton: Right.

Zimmerman: I don't want it to sound like we think we were great or anything, but I don't have any regrets... I don't think Greg does, and really the PSAs and the staff at Farview actually appreciated the things we did and our operational philosophy.

White: Plus, they pretty much felt that we saved that institution or it would have been struck down if we hadn't come in.

Zimmerman: That's right. That's true too. Believe me, Sue, it was all kinds of like pulling teeth initially... especially with some of the administration in that facility. It was pretty frustrating for a while.

McNaughton: Well it sounds like they had the right team to push into business early, thanks to you guys, and I think now Waymart has a very nice group of employees... committed and dedicated, and it's a nice facility.

Zimmerman: That's nice to hear. I haven't been there in a while. That's good to hear.

White: One other thing that I think is important, too, is that we had a deputy that we didn't know in Ray Colleran, and that turned out to be very helpful in that he was a local person connected politically and he kept us from making bad political errors.

Zimmerman: We learned a lot about politics. That's right.

McNaughton: Is there anything else that you guys want to talk about?

Zimmerman: Not really.

END