

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Susan Coulter McNaughton

Topic: The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots

Interview Date: August 10, 2019

Interviewee Background: Susan began her PA DOC career on January 3, 1985, as a clerk steno 2 in the Press Office. She served all but one year in the press office working as a clerical supervisor, an information writer, a deputy press secretary, acting press secretary several times, press secretary and finally as communications director. She worked one year as executive assistant to the executive deputy secretary, but returned to the Press Office, as that work best suited her and best served the department.

Recollection:

October 25, 1989

At 3 PM on Wednesday, October 25, 1989, I was serving as a clerk steno 2 in the Department of corrections press office. On this day my boss -- press secretary Ken Robinson -- was cranking out a number of press releases on his IBM Selectric II typewriter. These were press releases for the Pennsylvania Prison Wardens Association. He was the PR person for that association which was comprised of prison wardens from the state of Pennsylvania. The association was getting ready to have their fall conference -- they have a conference in the spring at a conference in the fall even to this day.

It was busy because Ken was drafting a number of PPWA press releases on people who were being named Warden of the year, lifetime achievement award, and those kinds of documents. When those documents were finished, it was my job to take them to the only fax machine on our floor and send them out. The fax machine was located around the corner and down the hall across from the commissioner's office. That office was shared by Bob Bitner at Don Williamson. I was there for quite a while waiting for each individual fax to send. As I was sending faxes and waiting for confirmations for each, I remember looking out the third-floor window which overlooked the compound of the State Correctional Institution at Camp Hill. Specifically, it overlooked the area that was comprised of the six main general population housing units.

It was a beautiful fall day. The sky was clear blue. The sun was shining, and it was warm outside. As I was standing there looking out the window, Bob and Don were watching, too, and talking about how beautiful a day it was and that the inmates were lucky to have such a nice, warm day that late in October.

It was then that we saw inmates lining up in rows on either side of the gate. There was a gate in the center of the institution that controlled the movement of the gate's opening and closing. I remember one of the guys saying, "This isn't good."

The inmates were lined up. It was a gauntlet. An officer came through the gate and was immediately pummeled by all of the inmates. This was the beginning of the riot. We couldn't believe what we were seeing. The three of us stood there and watched that officer take a beating as he ran through that gauntlet of inmates.

I immediately took off running back to my office, and I was screaming to DOC Press Secretary Ken Robinson that there is something going. Ken was standing in his office, already aware. He was looking out his window overlooking the riot while on the phone with the Governor's press office telling them that we were having an incident.

Something to remember is that because of the upcoming conference, all of the major leaders of the department were gone – they had left for the conference.

Ken then grabbed his 35mm camera and tons of rolls of film and went up on the roof to take pictures of the incident.

I ran back down the hall to where I was earlier. From the window I could see about 10 to 20 inmates beating a corrections officer whom they had backed up against one of the inner fences. Just on the other side of that fence was a little red, wooden shed that stored free weights. If that shed had been on the same side as the officer, he probably would have been killed. The inmates continued to beat him until another officer in the tower fired a shot into the air. The inmates scattered. An institution perimeter patrol vehicle arrived at the scene and helped the tower officer keep the inmates away from the wounded officer. He just laid there. It seemed like hours before he finally sat up and leaned against the fence. I was glad to see him sitting up, because then I knew he was alive, but he was alone in that yard, trapped.

I ran back to my office again because I knew the phones would start ringing. They did. Media organizations from all over the state began calling. By now all of the inmates were running through the yards. I remember seeing a truck ram through an inner fence, opening it up like it was made of paper. The commissary was burning. Inmates were burning everything!

My parents called me, and I asked them to call my husband at his work to let him know that I was ok. A lot of people from other parts of the building came into our office to look out our windows. We had a central view of the area where most of the rioting was taking place. Our messenger and our legislative liaison were up on the roof of our building operating a video camera along with our records officer who took over taking photos for Ken. At this point I learned that staff from Commonwealth Media Services, the state's photography/videography unit, was on their way to take over.

Ken returned to the office and instructed me to take phone messages until he was ready to answer calls. The reporters weren't happy. They wanted answers immediately.

Our deputy press secretary at the time was Sherry Cadeaux. She was attending basic training at our training academy. At that time, the academy was located on Utley Drive, just a mile or so away from our building. But she had left her ID in her desk. She was stuck at the checkpoint and couldn't get through. Our messenger had to go get her.

Individuals from the Governor's Office arrived, and a fax machine was also brought into our office because we needed to constantly fax news releases and statements between the institution, our office and the governor's press office. The Governor's Press Office was faxing to us AP and UPI wire articles so we could keep informed about what they were reporting. An individual from the Governor's Press Office actually came to us and was approving all news releases right from our office. We also had several VCRs that we used to tape local TV coverage of the riot. All of the major stations in our area had preempted primetime shows to report on our situation.

While I don't remember how it ended that day. I left the building around 11:30 p.m. and went home. I climbed into bed and cried in my husband's arms. I couldn't believe what had happened and kept asking him if it was real. He reassured me that it was.

October 26, 1989

I woke at 6:30 a.m. and got ready for work. The office was extremely busy. We received lots of calls from reporters checking on the status of the inmates and the institution. The day went pretty well considering how tired and shook up everyone was.

I worked until 6 p.m. When I left the building, I saw some TV vans leaving and thought to myself, "I hope they don't have to come back because of another riot." Why I thought that, I don't know.

When I got home, I was extremely tired and hungry. My husband, Keith, was home and ordered us a pizza. After eating the pizza, we decided to take a trip to the mall – which, by the way, is located on the backside of the prison. It was about 7 p.m. when, while driving toward the mall, I began to smell smoke. I thought, "God, don't let it be the prison!!" I also thought that maybe there was something wrong with our car, so I turned on the radio news. I heard the DJ announce that another riot had broken out at the prison. I told Keith to get me to the prison.

When we got to the road where the prison was located, police had it blocked off at Slate Hill Road. I showed my work ID to the officer so he would let us through. When we got to the building, I realized that I left my office keys at home and had to ring the doorbell to get into the building. Once I entered the office, the phone was ringing off the hook. I instantly began taking messages. Keith was in Ken's office looking out the window at the inmates rioting. Ken must have been up on the roof taking more pictures. I don't remember when I first saw him that night.

An employee from our Special Services office brought me a listing of essential personnel and told me to begin calling them in. We called every man on the list.

Keith was now in charge of monitoring and taping the TV news coverage of the riot. The local stations interrupted primetime shows to cover the event live.

I remember the smoke from the fires. Looking out my office windows, it was so thick that you couldn't see a light pole that was located in the center area of the prison. The smoke began billowing in our windows to the point where we had to close them.



Photo from PennLive/Patriot-News: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pN_-7v4X3bE

Two state police helicopters were circling over the prison shining lights down onto the yard and the inmates in the areas.

Around 10 p.m. Governor's Office staff arrived again. I decided to send Keith home because he was the only non-DOC person there, and I didn't want to get into trouble for having him there. I remember hugging him before he got into the elevator to leave. I was afraid that I may never see him again.

When I returned to the office, we discovered that the institution was lost – we had no control. I was terrified. Our deputy press secretary at the time, who was a new hire, said she would leave if the inmates got through the main perimeter fence, because she was sure they would come after us.

People continued to go in and out of our office because of its perfect view of the rioting.



Some employees kept their ceiling lights off – especially those offices that faced the prison. I guess people thought this would help them see out of their windows better, or maybe they thought it allowed them to watch the rioting without being seen by the inmates. I don't know.

In one room, the commissioner's executive assistant was coordinating emergency response teams from other prisons, and a large map was spread out on the table. No one was allowed in the room.

I remember going to the bathroom with the lights turned off because I was terrified and didn't want inmates in the yard to know I was going to the bathroom. I remember being in the bathroom and hearing the constant hum of the portable light generators. They set off an eerie orange glow in the dark bathroom. You could hear their humming no matter where you were in the building.

PEMA set up office on our floor. The National Guard kitchen was called in. You could hear Life Lion taking off and landing. The National Guard helicopters relieved the PSP pilots while they refueled.

At one point I was so hungry that I thought I was going to be sick. I went to our kitchen to get something to eat, but all I could find was bread to make toast and no butter – dried toast is what I ate. (This is the reason why I now have food hidden somewhere in my office. I never want to be stuck without food again.)

The kitchen was filled with employees from throughout the building who were making thousands of cold sandwiches. The place was a mess. All of the dining tables had been lined up so staff could work at making the sandwiches. Coffee and tea was set up in the breezeway outside of the building. It was nice to see all of the people working together. State Police, Corrections, township, county workers – all were in this together.

Sometime during the evening, Ken became really upset. I later learned that a father of an inmate had gone to his house (he found the address in the phone book) and scared the heck out of Ken's wife. Ken was shaken up and I don't blame him.

We received a lot of calls from family members of inmates and family of staff at the prison. I just kept taking messages. I had a stack that was a couple of inches thick.

I took media call messages into the deputy press secretary. She was unhappy because the same reporters were calling over and over and over because they had not yet received a return call. So, most of my time was spent stapling duplicate messages together for her in order to avoid confusion.

Between Ken and the deputy press secretary, there still wasn't enough staff to respond to reporters, so a former deputy press secretary who worked in another office was charged

with helping to respond to reporters and family of inmates and staff. That was Iris (Crumbly) Wilcox.

Ken stressed that we must take turns getting sleep or we wouldn't be able to continue working. He said that the situation was going to go on into the morning hours and that he needed us there to answer phones. I was sent to an office on the second floor to sleep on a couch. I was scared and uncomfortable. No one was around. They were either on the third floor trying to manage the riot or were on the first floor making sandwiches. Every time I closed my eyes, I was afraid I'd open them to find an inmate standing over me. I went back to the office, and Ken was angry. He took me across the hall to the legal library. I slept on the table. If you really could call it sleep. The window was open, but I had to close it because it was too noisy outside. Then I moved to the floor. I think I slept for about an hour.

When I woke, I went back to my office. It seemed quieter to me, but I discovered that the riot wasn't over. I looked out the window and could see boards of wood that the inmates had lined up against the fence to block our view. There were small fires everywhere in the yards. I could see inmates running on the roofs of the buildings. I could see ladders leaning against buildings – the inmates used them to climb up on the roofs. I could hear chain saws and see blow torches glowing.

One time while I was running down the hall to the other fax machine, I heard a huge explosion. It stopped me in my tracks. I thought that our building was blowing up. Luckily it was a propane tank exploding in a fire in the institution yard and not our building.

This went on for hours. Shortly before dawn on October 27, everyone was talking about the PSP taking over part of the prison. It was a nice feeling knowing that the institution would soon be under our control.

The nicest sight I saw was PSP officers lined up between the two rows of housing units. They were facing us. I could see the officers' face masks gleaming in the rising sunlight – it was pretty. But all of the rioting inmates had fled back into the six cell blocks – I missed them scattering away because I was busy taking phone messages.

The phones then became silent. SILENT. We all watched from our office windows. The helicopters dropped down in altitude to only a couple of feet about our office. They were so close that the wind from their propellers was blowing in through our open windows moving papers around on our desks. We were told to back away from the windows because the PSP officers in the yard may have to shoot, and if they did, they were aiming our way and would probably hit our building.

There was a lot of anticipation in the air. You could hear a man in the helicopter telling inmates to come out into the yard and lay down. They repeated this command a number of times. You could see white flags sticking out of some cell windows. They wanted to come out, but some of them were being held by other inmates.

Finally, they started trickling out ... one by one, crawling on the ground.

Keith showed up later that morning with a bag containing a hair brush, underarm deodorant, toothpaste and my toothbrush. The only way he could get through the road block to deliver these items to me was to tell the officer that it was my time of the month and that he had some personal things I needed. This wasn't true, but I needed the other items.

I was answering phones throughout this whole ordeal. Faxing statements and answering phones. Toward the end, I broke down. I just couldn't keep up with the pace of answering phones, typing, watching the VCRs, checking the fax machines. I started crying while faxing something. The deputy commissioner [Erskind DeRamus] came to me and comforted me telling me that it was ok for me to go home now. He knew I was spent.

When I returned to my office, Ken put his arm around me and asked how I was doing. I started crying and told him that I felt bad, like I was letting him down, but I just couldn't keep doing it any longer. He told me to go home.

I called my dad to come pick me up. I left around 12:30 p.m. I was extremely exhausted, but I couldn't sleep once we got to my parents' house. They lived just across town from where the prison was located, and I could hear the police scanner constantly going off. I could hear everything that was going on. Keith, who had been working, picked me up around 9:30 p.m. It felt good to get home, but again I was crying in his arms asking, "Did this really happen? Is this a dream? Those inmates had it so good. Do they realize how many lives they have affected?"

October 28, 1989

The next day was my 23rd birthday. I had planned to visit my parents, but the phone rang. It was Ken, he wanted me to come in to work.

I got to work around 12:30 p.m. On the way to work I stopped and got food, drinks and aspirin. I wanted to be prepared.

It was a beautiful day for a birthday. The sky was blue and the trees were just the right colors. I parked my car in front of the building on the grass and went inside. The phones were still ringing off the hook and the prison was still smoldering. One fire in the furniture factory wouldn't go out.

As I looked out onto the yard, no one was there. Not one inmate. The yard was a mess. All of the buildings had black marks above the windows where the flames were coming out the night before. Trash was all over the place. My desk was a total mess. All work had come to a screeching halt. Piles of work were thrown on the floor to get them out of my way.

I spent most of the day just answering the phones. I think Ken did one media briefing. My coworkers did find time to get me a birthday cake. I went home around 7:30 p.m., but was too tired to celebrate my birthday. I was still in shock... maybe disbelief was a more appropriate word.

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-10-28-mn-698-story.html>

Pennsylvania Prison Riot Ends; 3 Seriously Injured

Oct. 28, 1989 12 AM
From Associated Press

CAMP HILL, Pa. — A two-night rampage at a state prison ended Friday with a guard and two inmates seriously wounded, five hostages freed and much of the overcrowded institution destroyed or damaged by fire, authorities said.

There were no deaths or escapes, officials said, but more than 100 people were injured in the battle to take back the medium-security prison. Police officers firing guns and tear gas stormed a kitchen building as they began taking back control of the prison Friday morning, officials said.

Corrections Department spokesman Ken Robinson announced that officials were in control nearly 15 hours after inmates somehow freed themselves during a lockdown imposed because of a seven-hour riot Wednesday.

State policemen in riot gear and wielding shotguns pushed surrendering or captured prisoners to the ground, holding them face-down in the grass of a prison courtyard.

The uprising left Pennsylvania corrections officials scrambling to find cells for 960 prisoners from the State Correctional Institution at Camp Hill, which was 45% over its capacity at 2,600 inmates, Atty. Gen. Ernie Preate said. The state prison system as a whole is 48% over capacity.

The Corrections Department said inmates were being sent to the Graterford, Mercer, Pittsburgh, Smithfield and Waymart state prisons.

Fourteen of 31 buildings were gutted by fire, Robinson said.

An 18-year-old inmate was in critical condition with a gunshot wound to the upper torso, said Marianne Benjamin, a spokeswoman for Polyclinic Medical Center in Harrisburg.

A 24-year-old inmate was listed in serious condition after surgery for a small-caliber gunshot wound to the abdomen, Milton S. Hershey Medical Center spokesman Steve Bortner said.

A 41-year-old guard was in serious condition at the medical center with multiple stab wounds to the back, the spokesman said.

Only four hours before violence broke out a second time, Supt. Robert M. Freeman had said the first night's problems might have been linked to a decision to forbid families to bring food to inmates during extended visits. He said also that inmates were upset by a change in the way they received medical care.

October 29, 1989

Ken gave me this day off.

The following weeks were terribly busy. I went through a couple of weeks of anger and hate toward all inmates and their family members. I handled calls from irate firemen whose equipment had been damaged in the riot. They wanted to tell someone how they felt about not getting reimbursed for their time or equipment. A couple of times I had to get rude with some callers, because there was nothing I could do for them. After I spoke my mind, they became polite and apologetic. I really learned how to deal with people during this riot.

For weeks after the riot, I had strange dreams about inmates rioting for 501 days and me carting a dead officer's body toward the front gate of the prison while inmates laughed at me. I had dreams about family members dying. I was told that this was very common after a stressful event.

To this day, I still get upset thinking about the riot, and I can still see the flames, state police cars, inmates running in the yard, helicopters flying. I just can't put it all into writing, and most of my memories will just have to remain that... my memories.

Following the riot, Ken had been put in some compromising positions that he didn't appreciate. I truly believe he was traumatized by the rioting. He was alone in our building when the rioting kicked off again the second night. I don't believe he ever got over it, nor do I believe that he was ever fully "debriefed" afterward. He retired from state service in 1990. I was heartbroken, and he felt that he was abandoning me.

Also following the riot, many of the hostages were provided with psychological counseling. Some of those sessions took place in our building. I remember seeing a huge man being escorted by one of our mental health professionals to the counseling offices. You just knew that that person had been involved, perhaps even a hostage, and was devastated – you could see it on his face. I touched his arm as he passed. I don't know who he was, but I felt for him.

We all learned a lot because of this riot. Let's hope that we are never made to relive it.

END