

When Disaster Strikes Twice

Pennsylvania's Camp Hill riots were among the worst in corrections' history. How did the state DOC handle the media attention? Press Secretary Sherri Cadeaux shares their story.

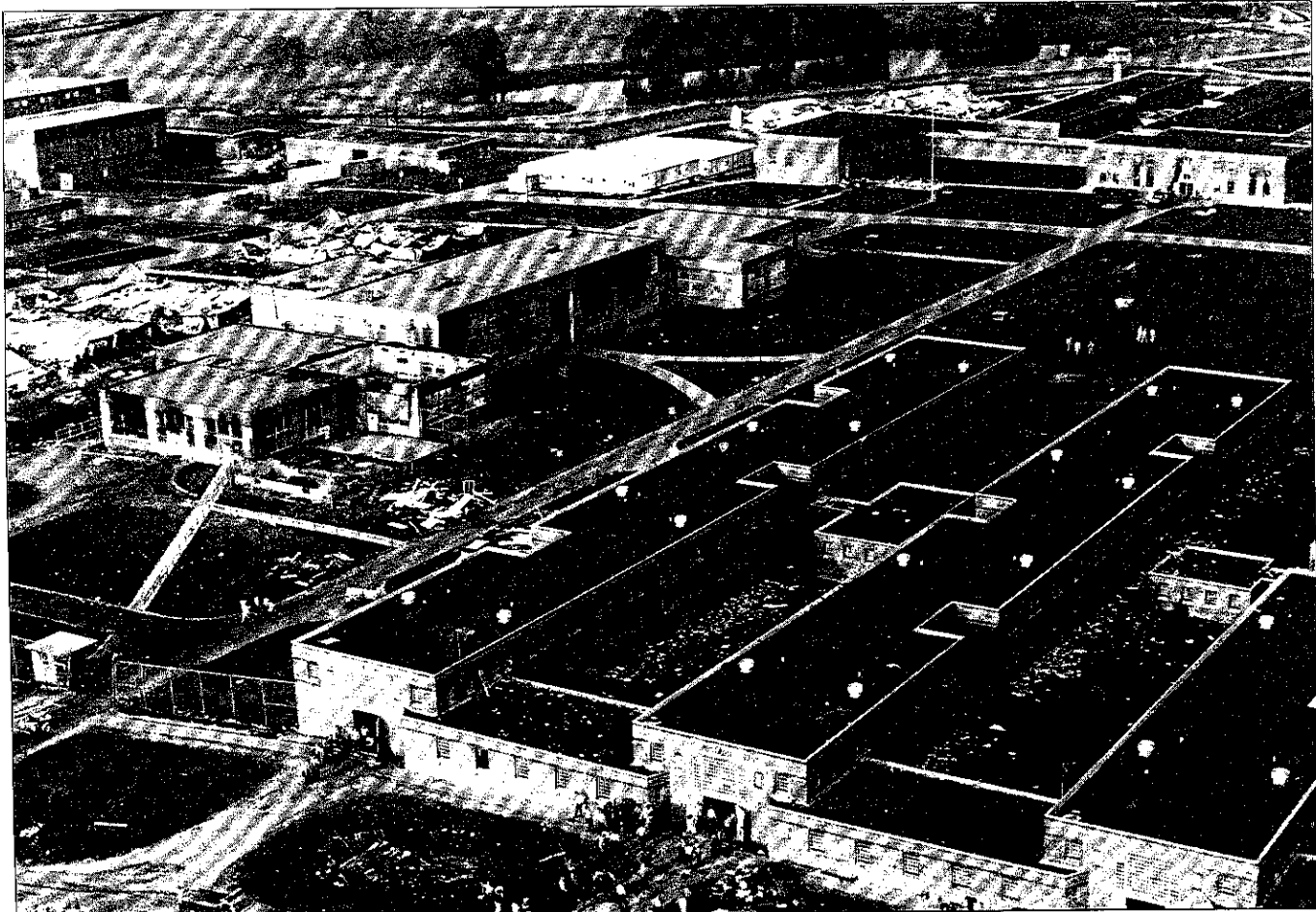


Photo courtesy Pennsylvania Department of Corrections

Inmates at the State Corrections Institution at Camp Hill, Pa., rioted twice in three days in December 1989, causing millions of dollars in damage and a flood of media attention.

by Sherri Cadeaux

From a public relations standpoint, there's nothing worse than having a disturbance at a state prison—except having a second, even more intense, disturbance on the following day. That's the situation the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections press office faced Oct. 25-27, 1989.

On the network news those nights, viewers from around the nation watched as inmates at the State Correctional Institution (SCI) at Camp Hill went on two separate rampages, tearing down cell walls, torching buildings and brutalizing corrections staff who were

seized as hostages.

I was hired as the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' deputy press secretary seven weeks before the incident. When the riot began, I was attending basic training at our academy nearby. Ironically, training that day had focused on handling emergency situations.

Although each of the state's 15 facilities has a trained spokesperson who normally handles the local news media during incidents, it was soon clear that in this case the Camp Hill spokesperson would need help from the

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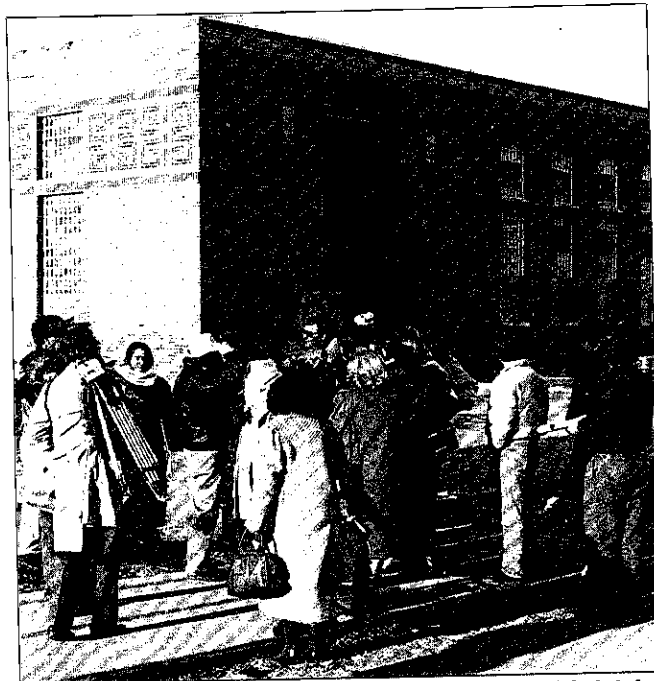
DOC's central press office because of the magnitude of the event.

Our public information operation is designed to process information in a way that avoids miscommunications and ensures accurate dissemination of information. When there is a serious incident, news media relations officers (NMROs) and their back-ups are responsible for gathering and verifying information, preparing a statement, reviewing it with the prison superintendent and sending it to the press office for approval. The press office then clears the information with the corrections commissioner as well as the governor's press office. Although this appears to be a cumbersome process, it is actually quite efficient, given today's communications technology.

At about 3 p.m. on Oct. 25, word began to spread that an incident was under way at the 49-year-old medium security prison, which housed more than 2,600 inmates. Local reporters, hearing scanner reports that police, fire and emergency personnel were being called to the scene, rushed to the prison.

The news media were temporarily kept at bay by the state police roadblocks, and media calls were forwarded to the DOC's central press office, which happens to be adjacent to the Camp Hill prison. Forwarding media calls gave the prison's NMRO time to collect information and set up a media briefing area on the lawn across the street from the prison's main gate. The media—including television crews with their accompanying equipment—were then allowed into the area.

The press office started a log detailing the series of events and began answering incoming media calls. We



Camp Hill's news media relations officer, John Palakovich, briefs reporters during a tour of the damaged prison.

notified the governor's press office and began monitoring television and radio coverage. We also started filming the incident from atop the department's administration building, which overlooked the main prison compound. These logs and videotapes proved to be invaluable later for documenting the event for the investigations that followed. By monitoring broadcasts, we could also note inaccuracies and correct them at the next scheduled update.

At about 5 p.m., the prison's NMRO gave reporters their first briefing, set the ground rules for access to certain areas and informed them that regular briefings would be held. He also asked reporters to refrain from speculating or broadcasting details of our tactical maneuvers, since inmates probably were listening to radios and watching televisions. Broadcasting some information could hamper our rescue efforts, jeopardize negotiations and endanger the lives of the hostages inside.

Another briefing was held an hour later to provide more details on injuries and fires inside the prison, and



Palakovich, center, prepares for an interview with a local television reporter.

to tell the media that there would be more briefings throughout the evening. At the 10 p.m. update, we announced that the institution was secured and officers were moving inmates back into cells and searching them.

That evening, we encountered several problems with the media. The first was with the briefing location. Reporters could see injured people being carried out and treated, security personnel entering and leaving the institution and tactical maneuvers. This prompted questions we could not answer for security reasons or because we did not have information on the conditions of the injured, and led some stations to speculate about their observations without first confirming their information. On several occasions, stations broadcast unconfirmed rumors of multiple escapes and deaths, none of which were true.

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It was difficult to keep reporters in the designated media area. At least one reporter managed to make his way up to the prison's perimeter and talk with inmates through the fence. This forced us to tighten security around the institution. After reviewing our handling of the incident months later, we decided to move the briefing area several hundred feet down the road from the prison.

Additionally, we underestimated the demands continuous live coverage presents. Television and radio stations broke their regular programming to broadcast non-stop. Because there was not enough new information to meet their demands, reporters began filling the void with unconfirmed scanner reports and speculation. Many continued live coverage, fearing their competition would gain an edge.

Prison and DOC press officers spent the next several hours after the 10 p.m. update and most of the following day providing reporters with background and follow-up information. Many reporters remained on the scene writing and broadcasting follow-up stories. Little did we imagine that the inmates would riot again that night.

Media Madness: Round Two

The second disturbance erupted shortly after 7 p.m. on Oct. 26 when inmates were able to free themselves from their damaged cells. The next 24 hours would prove to be the most difficult and challenging period, for not only were we physically and emotionally spent, but the department's credibility was at stake.

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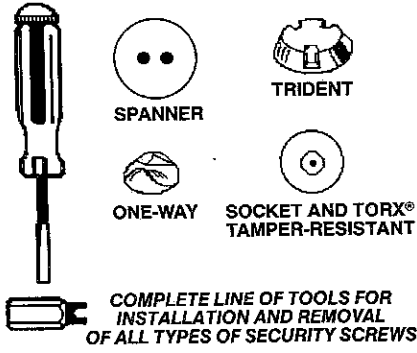
Our news media emergency plans were again activated and briefings were scheduled nearly every hour; we had learned from the previous night that the media required information more frequently during peak hours of broadcast, such as right before the morning, evening or late news. Hourly updates allowed us to immediately correct misinformation and discouraged reporters from wandering too far from the briefing area.

By midnight, it was apparent that the prison's NMRO, who had been awake and working since 6 a.m.

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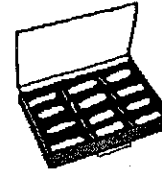
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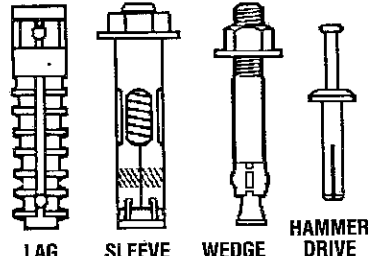
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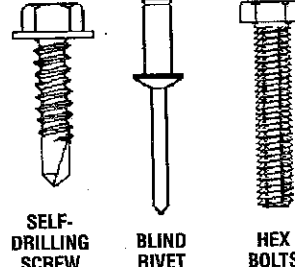
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the previous day, was too exhausted to continue working. Although all of us were tired, we were too high-strung to sleep and preferred to keep working. We decided to work and sleep in shifts so that we could maintain operations if the event should stretch over several days.


Because the situation remained unchanged and we considered the early morning hours a down time for reporters, we decided to conduct overnight briefings every three hours. The prison's backup NMRO gave the 3 a.m. update, followed by a 6 a.m. briefing by the DOC's press secretary.

On several occasions, stations broadcast unconfirmed rumors of multiple escapes and deaths, none of which were true.

While these briefings were being conducted, state police and prison staff were regaining control of the prison. Shortly after 9 a.m., we announced that the entire institution had been secured. The inmates were surrendering and we had begun assessing injuries and damage to the facility. The corrections commissioner, state police commissioner and superintendent of SCI Camp Hill conducted a joint press conference to review the series of events for the media.

During the two days of rioting, 17 staff members were taken hostage and 123 employees and inmates were injured. There were no deaths or escapes. The incident also resulted in damage or destruction to 15 of the prison's 31 buildings and the transfer of nearly 1,200 inmates to other Pennsylvania or federal institutions. Today, the state is in the process of rebuilding the entire prison, which suffered millions of dollars of damage.

Although the media was often demanding and critical of our response during the disturbances, we received many positive comments from reporters after the dust settled. Many said they appreciated the regular briefings, being able to contact the press office by phone to confirm information and the professional manner that we responded under tremendous pressure.

While we hope we never will again experience a disturbance as serious as the one at SCI Camp Hill, we have confidence in our ability to effectively manage the flow of information to ensure our credibility with the media and public. 

Sherri Cadeaux is acting press secretary for the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections and the former chief of community relations for the Delaware Department of Correction.

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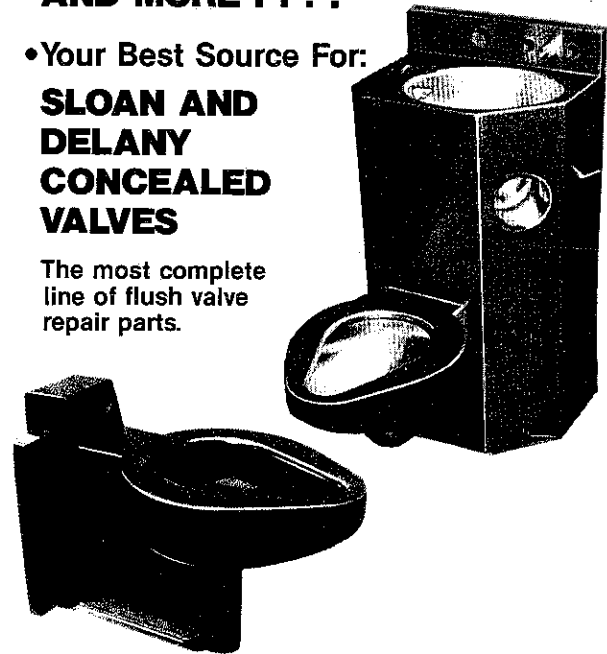
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