

Tough Cop

Mike Chitwood vs. the "Scumbags"

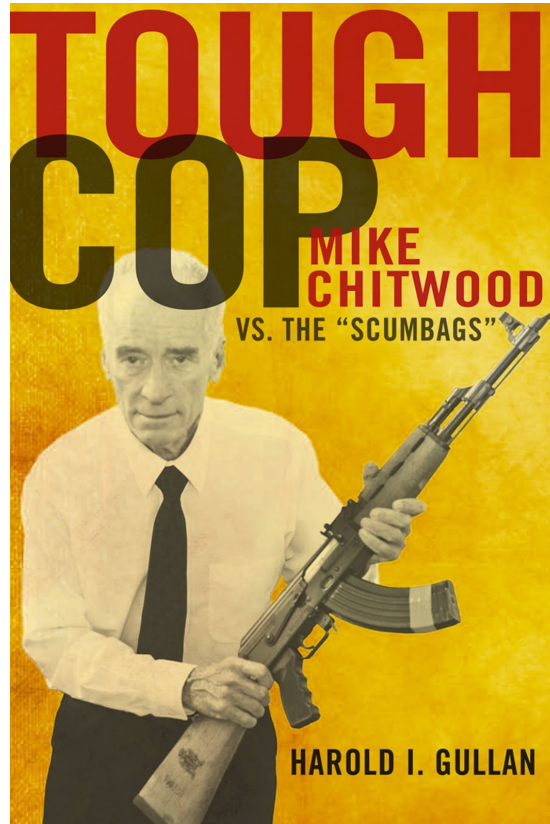
Harold I. Gullan

Launched Into the Limelight

"Hold on to the baby! Don't drop her!" With smoke pouring out of her third-floor window, young mother Virginia Brigden dangled from a rope between floors, desperately clutching five-month-old Lydia, the youngest of her five children. The exhortations were coming from a roving patrolman named Mike Chitwood. You never know where you'll be when an emergency propels you into action.

This predawn drama in a North Philadelphia row house during a frigid February started when neighbors saw and smelled the smoke, now coming from all three floors of the Brigden home. Could the fire department possibly get there in time? All that smoke, whatever had caused it, wakened Virginia's husband, Sam, who grabbed two of their children and instinctively found his way to the street. By luck he ran into patrolman Anthony Cacciatore and shouted that his wife and their three other kids were still inside the burning building. The patrolman rushed in, found the two eldest on the second floor, and got them out with no more serious result than mild smoke inhalation.

By now Chitwood and his partner, Michael Muto, had arrived on the scene. Fighting their way through the thick miasma up to the second floor,



Chitwood yelled encouragement to the dangling young woman, while Muto held him out of a window by clutching Chitwood's belt and one of his legs. Minutes after Chitwood had managed to take little Lydia out of her mother's arms, all the while holding on to Virginia and tightening her tenuous grasp on the rope, the firemen arrived and rescued her via a ladder.

All the police officers were subsequently commended. Chitwood was cited for heroism. It was not the first citation for a man destined to become the most decorated police officer in Philadelphia history. Nor was it his first exposure to the glare of the media. In the years to come his image would be of "Dirty Harry" and yet sometimes more like Mother Teresa. But he would always seem to be making news.

You get a lot of on-the-job training at the police academy, not all of it in the classroom. Only 20 in 1964, Chitwood was assigned with his fellow trainees to "riot duty." Riots and the threat of riots were as big in the '60s as drug busts would be in the '70s. On patrol in Philadelphia, Chitwood and his partner were nearly hit by a reckless driver hurtling down Broad Street. Jumping into their car, they finally cornered him after a 15-block chase. Of course, it turned out that this particular driver was wanted for a series of holdups. More commendations, more publicity. It also didn't hurt his upright image when Chitwood was involved in a celebrated flag desecration case, pitting civil libertarians against the symbolic emphasis of those in authority who revere the American flag.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" Fresh out of the academy and assigned to a North Philadelphia district, Chitwood and his partner spotted three young toughs mugging and robbing an older man in the street. When the rookies leapt out of their patrol car, firing a warning shot into the air, all three thugs ran. In the frantic chase that followed, two got away, but one was shot in the back and killed. Chitwood's partner, John Dillon, fired the bullet, but both young patrolmen were commended for their quick action. The deceased, his mother insisted, was only 17, although police records indicated him to be two years older. It was the first of many instances in which Chitwood would

be involved in accusations of using excessive force, including what is today termed “enhanced” interrogation techniques. He went quite literally by the book, aggressive and assertive. In an emergency, hesitation can be fatal. And somehow, whatever his methods, Chitwood always seemed to be right at the scene of action. He was already being featured in the media as the quintessential tough cop, a law-and-order stalwart in the image of future mayor Frank Rizzo, another son of South Philadelphia. Chitwood’s rise was rapid, leading to the highway patrol and ultimately the elite special investigations squad headed by celebrated Captain Clarence Ferguson, whose flair for publicity rivaled Rizzo’s.

Like virtually all of his future performance evaluations, Chitwood’s report of June 1965 included only “outstanding performance” grades, the equivalent of all A-pluses. His supervisor glowed, “You have maintained the same commendable degree of effort at all times. Your high number of quality arrests...were a credit to this command....I know I can rely on you at all times.” He even noted the six-foot-one Chitwood’s “neat appearance.” Indeed, the rather burly, clean-shaven, curly-haired professional of the 1960s would always retain that careful look. Sideburns and a mustache would make a very visible change in his outward appearance in the 1970s, as he traded his uniform for a trim suit. However, the major transition was in his weight and fitness, from 190 or more to a trim, sinewy 165. At 69, Chitwood starts his day at 4:00 a.m. at the gym, his schedule more controlled ever since a regular regimen of physical fitness could be sustained.

While still in the highway patrol, Chitwood, with his partner Anthony Kane, got a foretaste of the kind of confrontations he would face too often in the future. From *The Philadelphia Inquirer* of November 1965, “Two highway patrolmen disarmed and captured a pistol-wielding burglar in a North Philadelphia house Wednesday morning after they were alerted by neighbors who spotted the intruder climbing a seven-foot fence at the rear of the property.” Chitwood and Kane found that the place had been ransacked and that there was a man hiding in an upstairs closet. When he

emerged and pointed a loaded .38 revolver at them, Chitwood calmly knocked it out of his hand. Disarmed, the suspect had only \$15 on him, a stolen diamond ring, and six marijuana cigarettes in his pocket. It would not always be so easy to pin down an armed adversary, but Chitwood's proclivity for swift action never waned.

What has broadened and deepened over the years, along with his responsibilities, is perspective. In his late sixties, his hair gray, his manner almost courtly, his gait as effortless as ever, his reflexes seemingly as swift, and his puckish humor very intact, Mike Chitwood reflects that for all the millions invested in crime prevention, he's still striving to hold that thin blue line of protection against the same sort of adversaries he faced nearly half a century ago. It transcends race or class. The bluntest vernacular comes readily enough to anyone engaged in police work, including Chitwood. But he is better known for a distinctive epithet. The perpetual enemy of civil society is simply the all-encompassing "scumbag," which the *American Heritage Dictionary* defines as "a person regarded as despicable." Indeed, Chitwood, today the popular police superintendent of urban, exceedingly diverse Upper Darby, Pennsylvania, raised the ire of his few remaining critics when he sponsored fund-raising T-shirts bearing the slogan, "Not in My Town, Scumbag." All this did was raise thousands for art and music scholarships in the hard-pressed local schools. Each year, it raises more. His son, Mike Jr., a police chief himself down in Daytona Beach, Florida, is using T-shirts with the same slogan, gaining the same positive results. Funny. He also seems to have a proclivity for publicity.

Since being launched into the only profession he ever sought, Chitwood has served three very different communities as their police chief, been involved in solving more murders than Agatha Christie, escaped from more close calls than the Clint Eastwood character, and been proposed as a potential nominee for Congress in Pennsylvania and a candidate for governor of...Maine. It might be worth considering just how such an extraordinary career got started.