

Still a brand new police officer....

Christmas Eve of '76 was the first night of seven 3P-11Ps in-a-row for me. It would turn out to be a very hectic night. The malls (of which Bensalem had two) were packed with last minute holiday buyers, as were the many shopping centers, and there was heavy vehicular traffic everywhere. There were several serious car accidents, with police calls keeping us busy all over the township. However, what sticks out most about that night was what happened at roll call, before the shift even officially started.

With the ten of us patrolmen lined-up as usual, as Sgt. Ashton was advising us of the usual stolen car hot-spots, who's wanted, etc., I noticed Chief Larry Michaels, a man of about 50 years of age, tall and handsome with a full head of mostly dark hair, walk into the room and begin milling about and around us. I had never seen him at one of our roll calls before, so I figured he just stopped by to make sure we were accurately prepared for the night, equipped properly, maybe give us a pep talk about being careful out there, and generally doing what chiefs of police do on the occasion of when they attend this pre-shift protocol. He may have been there with us for these various reasons, but at the same time I could see that he was also in a seemingly jovial mood, certainly more so than I had ever seen him, and not seemingly very work oriented.

As Sgt. Ashton's roll call ended, Chief Michaels proceeded to wave us collectively over to the one side of the large paneled room where there were numerous stacks of cardboard boxes. I had never seen these boxes at roll call before, and I was curious as to their purpose when I first came into the area this day. From the reactions of the veteran officers on the squad, they seemed to know what to expect next. I didn't though, nor did the two other rookies with me.

As the troops slowly gathered around him, the Chief told us that he was going to distribute to us our “Christmas bonuses” for the year. He followed it with a hearty, “Ho ho ho, Merry Christmas!”

Huh? “Christmas bonuses?” For us? For me? What’s this all about?

I wasn’t sure exactly what was happening here in the roll room this afternoon. At this point of the start of shift, I’m usually already out in the parking lot going through the checklist on my car to make sure it’s gassed, fully functional, empty of the last officer’s trash and/or under seat debris, and ready to go. For a few minutes on this day, however, I just sort of drifted around in the back of the roll call room, trying to otherwise look busy and figure out just what was going on. Within a minute or two of doing this I was told directly by Sgt. Ashton to go and get in line behind the other officers waiting to see Santa Claus, aka Chief Michaels. So, I shrugged my shoulders, said “Okay,” and slowly meandered over to the back of the line. After all, I didn’t want to disobey my sergeant.

Being the last one among my squad mates, but nonetheless slowly moving up toward the Chief, I finally reached him. Once there, he held out his right hand, shook mine, and after double-checking my nameplate to make sure he had it right, he said, “Merry Christmas...Fitz!”

I responded in a spirited yet somewhat stilted manner, “Merry Christmas to you too...Chief!”

Michaels advised me to retrieve one of the now empty cardboard boxes around the place. Once I did so he then placed into it two bottles of whiskey, one bottle of scotch, two bottles of wine, and what felt like a twenty-pound fruit cake. Then, from his left hand, he fumbled through

the few remaining envelopes he had with him, found one with my name on it, and handed it to me. I mumbled a simple “Thanks,” and walked away.

I later opened the envelope and discovered that it contained \$35.00.

I was told by Sgt. Ashton that the money I received that year was less than that given to the veteran officers, and the amount was actually prorated to reflect my having been on the department for only four weeks or so. I think the senior officers got about \$150 each that year for their “bonuses.”

Okay...so was all this legal? Was this the same as taking the hot and cold beverages from the 7-11s during our patrol shifts? A cup of coffee can't cost the convenience stores more than a few pennies for each one. But, this? Definitely more than that involved here.

Since it was the BPD Chief himself giving this stuff to us, to me, I didn't turn him down at the time. No one else did either, at least not on my squad. Why should I create a scene here and be labeled as some sort of malcontent? After all, I'm only four weeks on the job; and I didn't think taking these items was technically illegal.

Technically, maybe not...but I really wasn't one hundred percent sure at the time if it constituted any other issue to me. I suppose given the fact that I was even thinking in these terms should have been a clue.

As we were finally heading out to our patrol cars, now around 3:10P, I followed the lead of my training officer, Dave Huetger, and first put my box full of goodies into the trunk of my personal car parked in the nearby parking lot. The other officers on my squad did the same.

I was told later that on every Christmas Eve Chief Michaels gives similar such items and cash to the patrol officers after they (the gifts) are generously donated by a few dozen business owners, managers, and bosses of various kinds throughout Bensalem over the holiday season. The leaders of these various entities, to include supermarkets, towing companies, car dealerships, fast food restaurants, law offices, department stores, and other private sector companies, purportedly feel that we cops deserve a little something extra for working as hard as we do, protecting their interests, their people, and helping them out in their respective times of need. So, these gifts were their way of saying not just “Merry Christmas,” but “Thanks,” too.

Okay, so these weren't bribes, right? I mean the Chief made sure he told us which companies and individuals donated the items to us, but that doesn't mean they deserved any special favors or treatment, right?

Well, they didn't get it from me, anyway. I actually forgot who gave what bottle, which tin of cake, or amount of cash, shortly after the Christmas season so it didn't really matter if I stopped one of the yule time donors for a traffic ticket or not. If it was a viable and supportable motor vehicle violation, I was going to write them, regardless of what they may have donated to the BPD the previous December.

As it turned out, this was just a onetime event for me. This was to be the very last occurrence of the long-held tradition of Christmas “bonuses” for BPD officers. For whatever reason, by the following holiday season of 1977, the Chief felt it may present a potential “conflict-of-interest” between the officers and the various businesses involved in the gift donations. The merchants were told the next Christmas season and the ones subsequent

“Thanks, but no thanks,” as the BPD was no longer accepting the liquor, food, and cash from them for redistribution to its officers.

And, so the tradition stopped, forever, after Christmas of ‘76. Well, at least officially.

More than a few officers were upset the following year when they learned that the bonuses were now a relic of the past. After all, this had been a multi-year tradition for many of them, and they and their families got to depend on it to varying degrees. Some were mad at the BPD management for going “by the book” on this recent decision. “Scrooge” was one of the kinder epithets for Chief Michaels heard around HQ that following Christmas season.

I happened to know for fact that a few of the veteran officers personally visited some of the same donor businesses around Christmas time of ’77, and even in later years, just to say “Hi,” and wish them a happy holiday season from the BPD. In doing so, coincidentally, they would receive at least a bottle of booze from these previous gift-givers as their unofficial and unsanctioned holiday “bonus.” None ever admitted to having received any cash gifts, but nothing would surprise me back then, at least as it applied to a few of the veteran officers.

And, no, I wasn’t one of those officers.

For various personal and professional rationales, rightly or wrongly, I stuck with just the free cups of hot chocolate and Slurpees during the rest of my career at the BPD; nothing more, nothing less. I decided that my \$9,500 starting salary for my first year on the job would have to suffice, sans any additional “bonuses.” I looked at the occasional overtime money as my new “bonus,” with each penny of it hard earned and definitely by-the-book.