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Pape's Law

Frank Pape had a simple code: "Break the law and you answer to me." He enforced that rule ruthlessly—often with gunfire—and when he died last March at 91, his fellow officers still considered him Chicago's toughest cop.

The newspapers were calling it the most sadistic, indiscriminate killing since the St. Valentine's Day Massacre: three men murdered and two others seriously wounded in a gang-related rampage. The three suspects—tagged the "Mad Dog Killers"—had dumped the bodies of their victims in and around Chicago.

Enter Frank Pape, the most famous cop in Chicago and perhaps America.

It was December 1947. After one of the suspects was captured, Pape got word that the two others, including Thomas Daly, the leader of the crew, were holed up in a third floor apartment at 820 South Winchester Avenue. Pape assigned men to cover the rear of the building; then he and his partner, Rudy Friedl, made their way to the third floor hallway and listened in silence, their guns drawn.

Suddenly, shots erupted from the alley behind the building. Pape ordered Friedl outside, and Pape himself kicked in the apartment door. "It was the only time I can remember that I knew I was going to get shot," he later recalled. "I could feel the bullets tearing into my stomach."

Fortunately, those bullets hit him only in his imagination. Inside the apartment, Pape's flashlight caught the figure of a man standing with guns in both hands. "I fired at him, but the adrenaline was pumping so hard, I didn't even hear my gun go off," Pape said. "I learned later on I hit him with five bullets." So much for Thomas Daly.

As it turned out, Daly had joined the remarkably long roster of suspects with the bad judgment to shoot it out with the fabled Frank Pape, who passed away in March at his home in Park Ridge at the age of 91. During five decades on the streets of Chicago, Pape, by his own count, fought in 23 gun battles; nine men died by Pape's hand, and his police work sent five others to the electric chair. As commanding officer of the Chicago Police
Department’s robbery unit, Pape ran an operation that helped send more than 800 criminals to the penitentiary. Few other police officers in CPD history have been decorated as much as Captain Pape, and none has received the notoriety. In his heyday, from the mid-thirties to the late fifties, he was profiled in nearly 50 national magazine stories, often labeled as “Chicago’s Top Cop” or “The Toughest Cop in America.” Yet, at the height of his career, Pape got caught in an ugly civil-rights dispute over a warrantless early-morning raid in 1958. Though he insisted he had behaved honorably, public sensibilities were changing and police methods faced tougher scrutiny. He ended his police days on traffic detail.

Over the past decade, as an ex-Chicago police detective turned writer, I spent hours talking to Pape, preparing a biography, The Toughest Cop in America (to be published this summer by Dilettante Press). The old detective’s stories and reflections on his long and controversial career offer a window on a lost era—a time when the job of a cop could still be filled by a gutsy swashbuckler.

Frank Pape was born in the Bucktown neighborhood in 1909, and he lived with his parents and a sister in a gray stone house at 2108 North Oakley Avenue. His parents divorced when he was nine, and his father died soon after. Young Frank hawked newspapers at the corner of Milwaukee and Western Avenues to help the family make ends meet. After two years at Lane Tech High School and some menial jobs, he spent seven years as a sheet-metal worker, until he was laid off in the Depression. Meanwhile, one Sunday afternoon at a neighborhood dance hall, he met a young woman named Kitty Tortorello. They married in 1931 and stayed together until his death.

Desperate for work, Pape took the Police Department test. He made the grade and was sworn in as a cop on March 25, 1933. At the time, Chicago was the crime capital of the country. Al Capone had tripped over the Internal Revenue Service, but John Dillinger, Pretty Boy Floyd, and Lester Gillis, alias Baby Face Nelson, were still roaming the city’s streets.

In his rookie year, Pape had an experience that forever colored his life as a cop. He met Richard Hansen, an informant who had befriended Baby Face Nelson while serving time for burglary in the Illinois State Penitentiary. Pape’s assignment was to take Hansen to a pool hall at Montrose Avenue and Broadway, where Nelson—on the lam from prison—was known to appear. Pape and Hansen spent a week at the place, shooting pool, and though Nelson never showed up, Pape took a liking to Hansen. “I remember being impressed with the fact that he wanted to do something with his life,” Pape said. “I liked him enough that I took him to my mother’s house one night and she made dinner for us.” Hansen asked Pape to vouch for him with the parole board, and Pape agreed. “I trusted the guy and believed him when he said that he didn’t want any more trouble with the police.”

Pape’s commanding officer advised him not to go out on a limb for an ex-con, but Pape decided to trust his own instincts. He told the parole board that he would help Hansen find a job and personally take responsibility for his new friend’s conduct. While the board was still considering its decision, Richard Hansen burglarized a North Side apartment, exchanging shots with two police officers as he attempted to escape. One of the officers, Mike Kelly, was among Frank Pape’s closest friends from the
police academy. Furious and embarrassed, Pape arranged to visit with Hansen at the county jail. When Hansen learned who was coming to see him, he hanged himself in his cell. "I learned a lesson that day that I never forgot," Pape later commented. "I went out on a limb for a guy that I thought I could help, only this guy just used me. I vowed I'd never get myself involved like that again."

By 1938, Pape had been appointed to the robbery section of the detective division. Early on, two detectives, Morrie Friedman and Rudy Friedl, asked Pape to partner up. Friedman, a shorter, rounder version of John Wayne, liked to wear nice clothes and usually had a cigar stuffed in his mouth. Friedl was a tall, lanky, unassuming veteran. Ironically, Pape himself was a gentle-looking man, five feet ten and never more than about 160 pounds. Over their seven years together, Pape and his partners participated in the arrests and convictions of more than 30 robbery gangs—and Pape became known for his uncanny ability to sniff out trouble. It led to success, but also to tragedy.

One day in the summer of 1945, after a gun battle with Indianapolis police, two thugs, Lymon Stanton Heiman and Edward Erwin, headed for Chicago in their convertible, along with Erwin's girlfriend. The three thought they could hide out in a city the size of Chicago, but driving around what is now River North, they ran into Pape, Friedman, and Friedl. "I noticed a convertible with two men and a woman pull up to the stop sign," Pape recalled. "At first I thought they were tourists enjoying the sights of Chicago. But then I looked closer and didn't like the feeling I got. I asked Friedl to stop the car." Heiman angled his car into the curb and fled on foot on LaSalle Street. Friedman and Friedl gave chase.

Pape was questioning Erwin and his girlfriend when shots rang out. Heiman had stopped, turned, and fired on Friedman. The first bullet plowed into his stomach, severing his liver. He dropped to the street, mortally wounded. Friedl fired back, and he and Heiman, each armed with two guns, circled a car blazing away at one another. More than 20 shots were fired before Heiman fell with a shot in the head. By then, Friedman had crawled into the street and was sitting against a parked car. "I'm through, partner," he told Pape as he died.

The events surrounding the case weighed on Pape for years. "The fact is, I was frightened by my own instincts," he said. "I was afraid my fellow detectives wouldn't want to work with me, afraid I might get them killed."

On October 19, 1945, just three months after Friedman died, Pape, Friedl, and their new partner, John Moss, were riding west on Division Street approaching Damen Avenue. "We were at a stoplight and I noticed a car with five men in it going in the opposite direction," Pape recalled. He told Friedl to make a U-turn and stop the other car. "Moss asked what it was that I saw," Pape said. "Trouble, I told him."

Once again, his instincts were right. The five men had just raided a garage, murdering the attendant and stealing a car. Now, the suspect car took off and two of the men inside, Victor Puzzo and Frank Randazzo, leaned out the back windows and opened fire. The cops set off in pursuit.
The two cars roared down the streets and around corners, careening off parked autos and sending pedestrians diving for cover. The fleeing car turned into an alley, and as the cops followed, they hit a pothole with such force that the back springs collapsed, causing the bumper of the car to screech along the pavement, sending up a shower of sparks. By now, Moss and Pape were shooting back. "Friedl was slowed by the dragging bumper and the noise was deafening, but he wouldn't give up—he kept the pedal to the floor," Pape recalled.

In an alley under the el tracks, west of Milwaukee Avenue at Willow Street, the gang's car couldn't negotiate a turn and crashed into a telephone pole. All five men came out firing. The detectives shot back, abandoning their vehicle and advancing through the alley on foot. One of the thugs dove under a car. Another was hit twice in the side and collapsed on the pavement. Frank Randazzo was hit in the leg. Victor Puzzo was shot twice in the head and once in the chest and died in the alley.

"This one guy we later identified as Charles De Cola was firing at me from behind an elevated station," Pape recalled. "After a rapid exchange of shots, I heard the click, click, click of an empty revolver. De Cola threw his hands in the air, yelling that he was surrendering. I stepped from behind a garbage can to take him in custody. At that moment he dove to the ground to reach for another gun. I didn't hesitate—I emptied my gun into him, killing him instantly."

Afterwards, at the coroner's inquest, while Pape was on the stand testifying, De Cola's father, Louis, started hollering, "Murder, murder, murder, my son was murdered!" Then he turned on Pape, shouting: "You'll pay the price for killing my boy! I know where you live and I will seek justice."

Years later, Pape recalled his response: "If you or anyone in your family come within one block of my home, or come around any member of my family, there's going to be some more funerals to attend and it won't be mine."

In fact, Pape was always careful to keep word of his exploits away from his family. After an incident such as the gunfight in the alley, Pape would call home and tell his wife, Kitty, not to read the morning newspapers and to hide them from his daughter, Judy, and his son, Jerry. Once, after Jerry did hear of a shootout, he asked his father if it was true that he had killed a man the night before. "I killed him because he needed killing, and I don't feel one bit bad about it," Pape told his son. "So if you feel badly for me, don't."

In 1957, Pape left the robbery unit to become deputy chief of detectives, supervising the activities of all CPD detectives. The next year, he led a raid that turned into a protracted court battle—an early sign that the old style of police work would come under new scrutiny. "If there was any one case that affected my police career, it was this one," Pape later admitted.

At the head of a squad of detectives, Pape raided the home of an African American named James Monroe, who was wanted for questioning in the murder of an insurance salesman. The cops didn't have a warrant for either an arrest or a search. "It was important to locate Monroe as quickly as possible because there were items taken from the victim's home and person that Monroe
might still have in his possession," Pape explained. By Pape’s account, the raid was routine: He roused Monroe from his bed and took him to police headquarters. A search of the apartment turned up nothing. Monroe was later released from custody after the victim’s wife, Mary Saisi, failed to identify him in a lineup. (In fact, she and her boyfriend were later convicted of the murder.)

But Monroe had a far different version of the raid. Among other things, he insisted that the cops had forced him and his wife to stand naked in the living room; that Pape had hit him with his flashlight and called him “nigger” and “black boy”; that the cops had ransacked the apartment; and that he had been detained for ten hours at the police station without being taken before a magistrate or allowed to call his family or an attorney. After his release, Monroe sued Pape and the other detectives in the raiding party for violating his civil rights. The case went up to the U.S. Supreme Court on the question of whether Monroe could sue in federal court under federal law (as opposed to bringing the claim in state court). On February 20, 1961, in a landmark decision, the court ruled for Monroe.

A trial was held later that year, and the jury decided that Monroe’s rights had indeed been violated, but the jury awarded him only $8,000—far less than the $4 million he had sought.

But even that decision didn’t settle the controversy. Monroe’s claims of being mistreated and brutalized were cited in a report on justice by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Time wrote a story on the report and included Monroe’s allegations—but neglected to mention that they were allegations, not established facts. Pape hired a lawyer and filed a defamation suit against Time. That case, too, ended up in the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled in 1971 that because Pape was a public official and Time had not shown “actual malice” in its account of the report, Pape didn’t have a case under the laws of libel.

While Monroe v. Pape and Pape v. Time lingered in the courts, Pape held several other high-level police jobs, including commander of the Englewood District. After cops in the Summerdale District were discovered running burglary rings in 1960, exposing what became a notorious scandal, Pape’s name was floated as a candidate for superintendent of police. Pape insisted he didn’t want the job. "It was a political appointment, which meant that it had political obligations," he said. Instead, he applied for a leave to take over as chief of security at several Chicago-area horse-racing tracks.

In 1965, Pape returned to the CPD, taking a refresher course at the police academy. But there was a new regime at headquarters, led by Superintendent Orlando Wilson, a former academic. For Pape, the echoes of the Monroe incident wouldn’t go away. He was tapped for assignment as a watch commander at the Albany Park District, where he had started his career 32 years before. It was the lowest command assignment available for a captain of police. The veteran detective refused the assignment and requested a transfer to the traffic division. He remained as commanding officer of Area Five Traffic until his retirement in 1972.

Afterwards, he lived quietly in suburban Park Ridge. Within the CPD, his legend grew, in part because he was the last of a vanishing breed, a tough, no-nonsense cop who lived by a simple
creed: "The good people of Chicago have a right to be secure in their homes and businesses. They have the right to walk the streets and use the parks as they choose to do so. They have the right to security and peace, and the right to be protected from molestation and violence. Anyone who violates those rights will have me to deal with."

A few years before he died, Pape went to a fundraiser for an officer at a Chicago union hall. More than 500 cops attended, and most of them had never known Frank Pape. Yet, when the old man was introduced, he received a standing ovation. Even in death, his reputation remains strong: Cops across the city have begun a grassroots movement to have the new $25-million First District police station at 17th and State named after Frank Pape. "He was the most outstanding police officer of the century," says John J. Flood, president of the Combined Counties Police Association. "No one else comes close."