

MIDDLETOWN

'I would do it all over again'

After 51 years and eight months on the job, Chief Frank McKenna has signed off for the last time.

By **GEORGE MATTAR**
STAFF WRITER

In April 1957, a blackberry was just a fruit. Eddie Haskell was schmoozing June Cleaver. Elvis was really alive. A new Chevy cost about \$2,000, and 21-year-old Frank McKenna became a police officer.

He joined the Middletown force April 19, 1957, becoming the seventh officer in the history of the department. On Friday, he left police headquarters for the last time as an official.

Instead of celebrating his retirement, though, McKenna was mourning the loss of one of his officers, Chris Jones. Just a day earlier, Jones was killed when a car slammed into his patrol car and pinned him under it on Route 1.

Jones was the first police officer killed in the line of duty in the department's 57-year history.

"It's the worst day of my career," McKenna said Thursday.

And McKenna, 73, had many days in law enforcement.

For his last four years as chief, McKenna was the longest-serving police officer in the state, according to the Municipal Police Officers Education and Training Commission. Statewide, there are 1,156 police departments and more than 22,000 officers.

On McKenna's first day on the job, the starting pay was \$1.42 an hour or \$62.48 weekly for a 44-hour week. Today, he leaves having earned more than \$100,000 annually the last few years.

"Believe it or not, I was living high on the hog then. My wife, Beryl, and I got married in 1956, and were living in an apartment on Old Lincoln Highway. Today, I live only an eighth of a mile from there."

When the amicable McKenna joined the force, there were no cell phones, no pagers and no laptops in the squad cars. The cars did not have air conditioning, power steering or power brakes. Windows had to be rolled up and down manually.

"But they were fast even then," he said of the patrol cars. "I had a 1956 Plymouth squad car with the Golden Commando engine up to 105 mph chasing suspects, and one night, both front tires blew out on me at about 75 mph going up West Maple Avenue. The next day, the chief yelled at me and asked why I took that car. I told him it was my regular squad car. He said it was getting traded in and they had put junk tires on it.

"Despite that, and some other close calls, I never put a dent in a police car in 51 years and eight months," he said proudly.

Born and raised on Hulmeville Road in Langhorne, McKenna is a deeply religious man who said he became a police officer after spending two years trying his hand as an auctioneer and then as a truck driver for Lower Moreland in Montgomery County.

"I was influenced by a neighbor, Stanley Maston, who was a Middletown police officer. It seemed like a good job and I don't regret one day of it. I would do it all over again," he said. "I will miss all the officers. Most of them are like my grandkids."

His first call as a rookie was for the rape of an 18-year-old woman in the Cobalt Ridge section of Levittown. "I was a rookie and some other officers helped handle the call. I just listened and learned," he said.

Today, the Middletown force has 54 officers. There have been but three chiefs in the department's history: Howard Shook, Michael Chitwood and McKenna. Shook is deceased, and Chitwood is the police superintendent in Upper Darby.

McKenna said some of the biggest changes in police work today, in contrast to 1957, are: the existence of identity theft; more crimes today are against people than property; and fewer

people respect law enforcement officials today.

"Technology also certainly has come a long way. We used to carry these huge two-way radios on a strap. They were very heavy. If we stopped a car and had to check the license plate number, it took a minimum of 20 to 25 minutes and, many times, we'd let the person go and not know he was wanted until we got a call back from a dispatcher, who had to leaf through huge books checking the driving records. Today, our officers can type information into their laptop in the cars and, in seconds, they will get a voice answer without even taking their hands off the steering wheel."

During his half-century of service, McKenna has seen Middletown grow from a farming community to a thriving suburb. When he joined the force, Middletown's population hovered around 2,000. Today, it's 22 times that.

"When I got hired, 65 percent of the land in Middletown was farmland," he said. "We had stores then — Grants, Kinney Shoes and the car dealers — but other than that, our biggest places were the two dairies, Greenwood and Harbison, and Langhorne Speedway. That was great duty, working the races. We used to start at 6 a.m., work until about 10 p.m. and get a \$10 bill, a hot dog and a soda. It was great money," he said.

In June 1959, McKenna was promoted to detective. Four years later, he moved up to sergeant. And four years after that, he was named detective sergeant. In 1971, he was promoted to lieutenant, a rank he held until being named interim police chief in 1988. On Valentine's Day 1989, he was named the township's top cop.

McKenna has countless highlights of his career, but said the one that was reached last month was the pinnacle for him.

"The highlight of my career without question was seeing the department attain accreditation. To have the state validate us as one of the elite was great. Training and education have always been a priority of mine and this was a goal of mine before I retired," said McKenna. "It was plenty of hard work by every officer in this department. No one person was able to accomplish this. It was a team effort from the start and I am very proud of all my officers."

The other highlight he cherishes most was the formation of the Safer Neighborhoods Are Possible program, which he took into township neighborhoods in the early 1970s.

"We had a severe burglary problem. Back in the early 1960s, and for many years after that, most families had at least one parent home during the day. The burglars struck at night. But times changed and both parents began working, so no one was home," he said.

"We went into those neighborhoods and educated people, got them together to meet each other and had coffee and cake afterward. Those meetings were very productive and, by 1980, we reduced residential burglaries by 60 percent. I even had one woman who lived across the street from one family for 14 years and, before I introduced them, the two had never spoken. Neighbors learned to watch out for each other," he continued.

Chitwood called McKenna the "ultimate professional."

"I worked with Frank four and a half years," Chitwood said. "He was immediately liked by anyone he met. He was one of the best liked I ever worked with. He had access to the community and people respected him. If there was a dispute, he was great at smoothing things over. He knew the job and how to handle himself."

McKenna has come in contact with thousands of officers throughout his career and said he has hired probably 80 percent of the officers working in Middletown today.

Lower Southampton Chief William Wiegman Jr., a police officer for 36 years, said: "I've known Frank for 36 years. He is a good guy. He was very community-oriented and active in getting Middletown's Town Watch started back in the 1970s. He is easygoing, strong, old school and very knowledgeable."





Middletown Township police Chief Frank McKenna gets his sergeant badge from then-Chief Howard Shook in 1963.



Retired Middletown Township Chief Frank McKenna sits in his office, reflecting on his 51-year career.

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