Praise for

CODE 33

Tom Wamsley has written an utterly original, thoroughly engaging memoir about his experiences as a police officer during the colorful, turbulent era of 1970s California. His intense curiosity and youthful fearlessness—but above all, his humanity, humor, and sincere desire to be of service to others—shine on every page. This book has radically expanded my appreciation for what it truly means to be a cop! ***Code 33*** *was so enjoyable that I could not put it down.*

–Frank W. Berliner
author of *Falling in Love with a Buddha*
and *Bravery: The Living Buddha Within You*

Code 33 *is written in an open, almost folksy manner that comes from the author's heart. Readers with a law enforcement background will have their own experiences revived. Those without a background in law enforcement will have the opportunity to visit a world that is not generally available to them.*

–Al Casciato
Captain, San Francisco Police Department (retired)

In his reflections and stories collected from a decade in law enforcement, Tom Wamsley captures his experience as a police officer and deputy sheriff in both big city and small county policing during the disco decade of the 1970s with unique perception. Wamsley spans a breadth of memories that include those of the relatively anonymous patrolman in the bright lights and glitter of the city to those of the solitary mountain patrolman where not only does everyone know your name, they also know where you live.

–Vince Hurley
trial attorney, former San Francisco Police Officer,
and former Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Department Sergeant

Code 33 *readily draws you into the world of law enforcement, from career start to patrolling the streets. The author's daily "ride along" experiences take you into the murky depths of investigations and the intricacies of prosecuting horrendous crimes. Wamsley was confronted with the complex worlds of good and evil on a daily basis, and he gives the reader a glimpse of what it was like. Being a police officer is not easy; being a motivated professional is even harder. This well-written book is a glowing testament to our nation's law enforcement community and the ongoing need for restraining evil in society.*

–Grady T. Birdsong
USMC Combat Veteran and author of *A Fortunate Passage* and
The Miracle Workers of South Boulder Road: Healing the Wounds of War

Best cop book I have ever read, and it was hard to put down. Author Tom Wamsley gives us an exciting, behind-the-scenes view of what it was like to be a police officer and detective in the San Francisco area during the 1970s. He neither glamorizes nor routinizes his gritty work with murderers, prostitutes, drug dealers, and fellow police officers, but presents it in a matter-of-fact and heartfelt manner. This book gave me a glimpse into the seedy underbelly of society and a new perspective of the job of bringing criminals to justice.

–Charles Horowitz, PhD

CODE 33

True California Cop Stories from the 1970s

THOMAS WAMSLEY
Former San Francisco & Santa Cruz County Cop

Code 33: True California Cop Stories from the 1970s
Tom Wamsley

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INTRODUCTION

HAVE YOU EVER LOOKED in the rearview mirror and seen a police car right behind you? What was your first reaction? Did you immediately look at the speedometer? Did you take your foot off the gas pedal? Did you feel paranoid? Were you terrified? Depending on one's culture, social circle, or life experiences, police officers can be seen as oppressors or as the good guys.

The stories that follow are from my best recollection, the images stored in my mind, and the research I gathered on some of the experiences I had during my more than ten years as a California law enforcement officer. Many events will never be forgotten. Some of the stories are also about fellow officers I knew. The dates may not be exact, every detail may not be accurate, and some details are invented to round out a story, but all the stories are based on real events and my memory of those experiences. To protect the innocent, most of the names have been changed with the exception of the officers who died in the line of duty and felons who died in prison. Certain details have also been changed to further protect the innocent.

I know that the experiences I have written about may pale when compared to experiences of many law enforcement officers. But my experiences have left a lifelong impression on me. When I retired at the age of seventy, I had a compelling desire to write and share some of my stories, especially in light of the harsh condemnation that law enforcement has been receiving in some quarters at this time.

I know firsthand that there are cops who somehow slipped through the screening process and should not be wearing a badge. But from my experience and in my opinion, those cops are in a small minority. This book is not about them. This book is about the cops I worked with or encountered who were good-hearted professionals doing their best to serve their community.

It is easy for people, even cops, to second-guess and Monday morning quarterback certain behaviors and decisions that police officers make. Unless the person passing judgment was actually present when the event took place, they don't have all the facts. I must confess, though, that I did poke fun at myself and second-guess myself in a number of situations. I also learned from those experiences.

Please be aware that some of the language in this book is R-rated. Some of the stories are violent and graphic, and they may not be appropriate for young readers. Sometimes police officers find harsh language helpful when they are trying to communicate with some criminals or are attempting to gain control of a potentially dangerous situation. Television cop shows play down and soften the speech of what sometimes actually happens in the heat of action.

During my fifty-two years of work experience, the most satisfying and exciting job I ever had was the job of being a cop, and the best managers I ever had were during those years. Unlike TV cop shows, every day was not filled with high drama, intense action, and shootouts. But police work is sometimes dangerous and filled with adrenaline rushes. Other times, satisfaction comes from changing a flat tire for an old lady or helping a lost child find their mother or father.

While writing this book, I found myself becoming deeply immersed in my memory of events as if they had just happened. I also found myself questioning my decision to leave law enforcement and having momentary regrets for doing so.

As it turned out, though, it was the right thing for me to do at that time.

The stories that I have chosen for this book are a mix of events that I encountered as a cop between 1970 and 1980 with the San Francisco Police Department and the Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Department in California.

Between January 1970 and September 1974, when I was a San Francisco police officer, nine San Francisco police officers were killed in the line of duty:

January 1, 1970 – Eric Zelms
February 16, 1970 – Brian McDonnell
June 19, 1970 – Richard Radetich
October 19, 1970 – Harold Hamilton
February 11, 1971 – Charles Logasa
July 30, 1971 – Arthur O'Guinn
August 29, 1971 – John V. Young
January 24, 1972 – Code Beverly
September 19, 1974 – Michael Herring

The 1970s were interesting times in America. The Viet Nam War had stirred up much controversy, causing huge divides among Americans, and as some have said, a cultural revolution was born. I am not condemning protests against the war. Many patriotic Americans had serious questions about our involvement in that war and how we were pursuing it. But some far left-wing antiwar activists went to extremes to protest American involvement in the war, as well as other mores and practices, both political and societal.

Some of the activists joined or formed groups that crossed the line by becoming involved in acts of violence or terrorism. These included the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), the Weathermen and the Weather Underground, the Black Panthers, the SLA (Symbionese Liberation Army), the Black Liberation Army, the United Freedom Front, and the New

World Liberation Front (NWLF). Although these groups dominated much of the headlines and gave rise to much media commentary in those days, normal human dysfunction was just as prevalent then as it is today. The need for educated, well-trained, even-tempered, physically fit, professional law enforcement officers was just as critical then as it is today to help maintain a safe and civil society. I am proud that I was chosen to protect and serve my community and my country.

I believe everybody has interesting events in their lives. These are some of mine. I hope you enjoy them.

CHAPTER ONE

California Dreaming

I KNEW I LOOKED SQUARED AWAY, but I was anxious, and I hoped that the oral board panel in the next room would not see me sweat. This was the most important interview I had ever had in my twenty-four years of life. I was sitting in a hallway by myself outside a conference room in a San Francisco City and County building. It was 9:45 AM on a Tuesday morning in January 1970. The interview was scheduled for 10:00 AM, and I made sure I would not be late. It would be one of the final steps in the hiring process for the San Francisco Police Department. I was dressed in my dark gray business suit with a white shirt, dark blue and red striped tie, and spit shined black lace up wing tips.

I had already successfully passed the written aptitude and intelligence exams, my physical health exam, the physical agility and strength tests, and my psychological assessment. I was one of three hundred candidates who competed to become a San Francisco police officer. Most of the candidates had already been eliminated from the process. If I passed the oral board, the final step before the job offer would be an in-depth background check. I found out later that the department investigators even contacted my high school headmaster and commandant, my college advisor, and neighbors back East where I grew up.

As I sat there waiting, I wondered what kind of questions they would ask me. I hoped they would not ask me why I left the University of Tennessee and moved to California. I did not want to tell them I had flunked out because I joined a fraternity, drank too much beer, and chased pretty girls. At that point in my life, I was too immature to be involved with any of the girls I chased. I was embarrassed and ashamed of myself because my parents had sent me to an expensive southern private military academy to help me prepare for college. I had blown it.

In January 1966, the US was ensnarled in a costly and controversial war in Viet Nam. I had a choice: sign up for the military or get drafted. I chose the Marine Corps Reserve. During the six years I was in the active Marine Reserves, the US Department of Defense never activated the reserves to go to Viet Nam. After completing basic training and my active duty assignment in the Marine Corps, I made a commitment to my parents and myself to complete my college degree and try to make the world a better place.

In 1968, I married Marsha Brinkley, my girlfriend who happened to be from my neighborhood. With encouragement from my sister, Carol, a Sacramento schoolteacher, we packed up my British racing green 1967 Mustang fastback and followed our dream to California. In 1969, Marsha gave birth to our first child, Julie.

I had decided to become a juvenile probation officer and returned to college in California in pursuit of that goal while working full-time at the Ford Motor Assembly Plant near San Jose. A college degree in an appropriate field was necessary to become a probation officer.

Craig O'Donnell, a longtime friend of mine, had put me in touch with his brother, Roy, who was a Santa Clara County probation officer. Roy suggested that I become a police officer while I finished school. He said that as a cop, I would get a

real education into the world where offenders live. I had never thought about being a cop, but Roy's suggestion sounded reasonable and could prove to be exciting.

On my way home from the Ford plant one day, I heard the movie actor Raymond Burr announce on the radio that the San Francisco Police Department was in the process of recruiting new officers. In 1970, the SFPD did not require a college degree to become a cop. I thought I would give it a shot. I knew that police work could be dangerous, but the only fear I had was that I might have to direct traffic. I could just see myself standing in the middle of a busy downtown San Francisco intersection smashing cars and trucks into each other.

At 9:50 AM, the conference room door opened and a tall young man in a business suit walked out. Expressionless, he looked at me, nodded, and walked away. The fact that he was not smiling made me even more nervous.

At 10:00 AM sharp, the door opened and I was invited into the room. I sat in a chair that faced a long table with nine people in civilian clothes sitting behind it. They were all looking at me and the paperwork before them. I assumed that the paperwork included my application and the other documents that had been generated about me during the testing process.

A long series of questions began. They asked if I was planning to complete my college education and how much alcohol I consumed. They asked if I had any racial or religious prejudices. They asked why I wanted to be a police officer and had numerous other questions. When they asked why I wanted to be a police officer, I told them with complete honesty that I wanted to get involved and wanted to help make the world a better place.

Toward the end of the interview, a board member, Sergeant Stamps, leaned across the table and said, "Mr. Wamsley, I see on your application that you went through Marine Corps boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina. Are you

willing to go through training in the San Francisco Police Academy that is just as tough as it was at Parris Island?"

I thought to myself that there was no way the police academy could be as tough as Marine Corps training, but I meant it when I responded to the sergeant, "Sir, I will do whatever it takes to become a San Francisco police officer." The sergeant gave a slight smile and asked no more questions.

It was three weeks of anxious waiting before I received a formal letter with a City and County of San Francisco return address on the envelope. I ranked number six out of the three hundred original candidates.

The San Francisco Police Academy was on the top floor of the San Francisco Hall of Justice at 850 Bryant Street. The academy class started in April 1970 with twenty-eight well chosen, intelligent, physically fit, and high-spirited young recruits. Training would be a total of eighteen weeks in duration. The first six weeks were in the classroom and included among many topics: SFPD culture, the California Penal Code, criminal law, rules of evidence, arrest techniques, observation and awareness, CPR and first aid training, and firearms training with a variety of weapons. The second six weeks was in the field, one-on-one with a training officer. The final six weeks included time back in the classroom, on the firing range, and becoming familiar with the tear gas chamber. We also received martial arts training designed specifically for law enforcement and had tactical drills for mass demonstrations. After leaving the academy, rookie officers would always be with a senior officer for another twelve months.

For the most part, the academy was not exciting, just excellent training. It did become exciting when, during the first six weeks, .357 magnum revolvers were issued to all recruits. A recruit by the name of Henry strapped on his gun belt with

the revolver in the holster, walked up to a full-length mirror in the locker room, looked at himself, and then quick drew his weapon, firing one shot and blowing a hole dead center in the middle of the mirror. Everyone in the locker room, including me (standing right behind him), immediately started backing away or taking cover. Henry stood there frozen in front of the mirror and looked at the revolver in his hand. "Oh, my God, what have I done, what have I done?"

One of the academy sergeants entered the locker room, looked at Henry, and very calmly said, "We were just looking for someone to scrub and clean the wrestling mats after class for the rest of the academy training. It looks like that will be you."

Henry was a lighthearted, good guy and was just not thinking when he made that mistake. Cops are human. Sometimes they make mistakes. Fortunately, Henry did not lose his job.

Tall, blonde, twenty-eight, a former college competitive swimmer, and a former US Marine, Henry became an excellent asset to the police department. After completing the academy, he was assigned to the Taraval Police District. That district was mostly a high-density residential area, bordering the Golden Gate Park on the north side and the Pacific Ocean on the neighborhood's western boundary.

One night, Henry was driving on routine patrol with his partner, Rick Pedersen, when Rick spotted a shiny new Buick Electra in front of them. The officers thought that the driver, a young white male with long black hair that stuck out from under a baseball cap, looked out of place in that kind of car. Rick radioed the police dispatcher and asked for a vehicle registration and warrant check on the license plate. The dispatcher quickly responded that the vehicle had been reported stolen earlier that day.

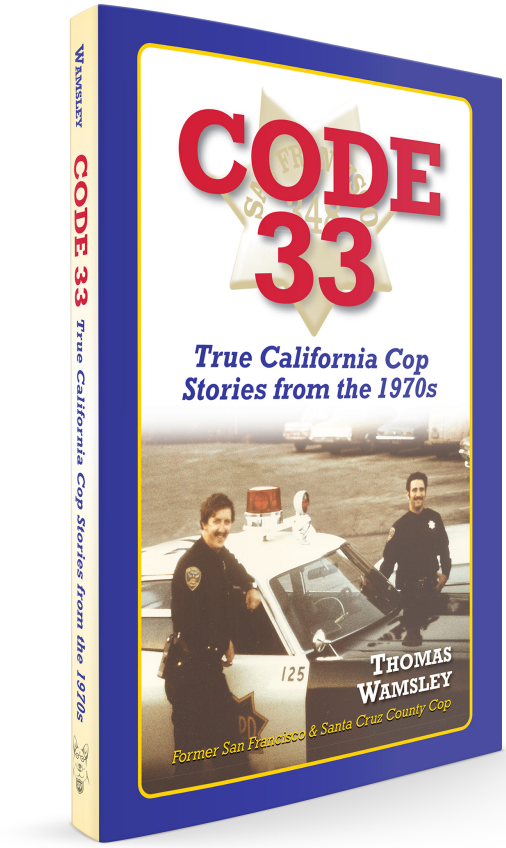
Rick requested a backup to assist before attempting to stop the car, but before a backup unit could arrive, the driver in the

stolen car accelerated in an effort to elude the officers. Rick immediately reported that they were in hot pursuit of the stolen vehicle. He gave a full description of the car, the plate number, where they were located, and the direction they were going. The dispatcher announced a code thirty-three to all units. Once a code thirty-three is called out, the only personnel allowed to talk on the radio are the police cars directly involved in the situation at hand and the police dispatcher.

The pursuit took them through residential neighborhoods at speeds in excess of sixty-five miles per hour, then into Golden Gate Park. Henry and Rick were not far behind when the suspect came to a skidding halt. The driver jumped out of the car, dove into a lake, and started swimming to the opposite side in a desperate effort to evade capture.

According to what I was told, Henry, being a former gung-ho Marine and college swimmer, dove into the lake—gun belt, boots, uniform, and all. He went after his target like a torpedo, overtaking him and subduing him in the middle of the lake. He then dragged the suspect back to the shore, where he was handcuffed and taken to Richmond Station. The man was booked for grand theft auto and outstanding warrants.

Had that suspect known who was chasing him, he would have thought twice before trying to swim to freedom.



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