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Former San Francisco Chief, Alex Fagan Sr., Dies at 60

Best known for what happened in November 2002, after two men reported being attacked over a bag of steak fajitas by a group of off-duty officers.

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Alex Fagan Sr., a larger-than-life police officer who survived a scandal that involved his rookie cop son and a bag of fajitas and rose to lead San Francisco's force, died Monday in London, friends and authorities said.



The former police chief collapsed after walking his dog, friends said. He had turned 60 on Nov. 2.

A Scotland Yard spokesman confirmed Mr. Fagan's death. Authorities will conduct an autopsy in coming days, the spokesman said. Friends said Mr. Fagan had recently traveled from his home in Napa to London to be with his longtime girlfriend, Shannon Hodges, an Internal Revenue Service special agent who had been assigned to the embassy there.

They expressed shock, saying Mr. Fagan, who has two grown children, had been in the best shape of his life.

Former San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown, who appointed Mr. Fagan as a deputy chief and then as police chief, said he was "sad beyond belief."

'Great Policeman'

"Alex was a great, great policeman for San Francisco," Brown said. "You don't really get the respect of the team unless you've looked down the gun barrel, so to speak, working with them in the streets. Alex had run the whole gauntlet of things you can do as a police officer and at all times measured as outstanding."

Victor Makras, a former city police commissioner, called Mr. Fagan "a cop's cop. If you wanted something done, he knew how to get it done."

Before being named chief, Mr. Fagan won three silver and five bronze medals of valor. He helped save 30 men from a gay bathhouse fire in 1976 and, three years later, swam 200 yards to save a suicidal woman in the bay. As chief, he was praised for his handling of street protests against the Iraq war.

His career, though, was stormy as well, and his appointment to the chief's position raised the eyebrows of police watchdogs.

15-day Suspension

A combative 1990 confrontation with California Highway Patrol officers in San Mateo County, for instance, prompted the city's Police Commission to suspend him for 15 days and order him into an alcohol treatment program.

He is perhaps best known for what happened in November 2002, after two men reported being attacked over a bag of steak fajitas by a group of off-duty officers that included Mr. Fagan's rookie son, Alex Fagan Jr.

The incident - dubbed "Fajitagate" by the media - prompted allegations that the officers enjoyed favorable treatment, eventually leading to a grand jury indictment of Mr. Fagan and several other command staff members on charges of conspiring to cover up the incident. The indictments were either dismissed by prosecutors or tossed out by a judge.

Brief Tenure

After Mr. Fagan was cleared, Brown named him acting chief in March 2003 and chief that September. In January 2004, a newly elected mayor, Gavin Newsom, fulfilled a campaign promise by removing Mr. Fagan and shifting him to head the city's emergency services office.

Then, two months later, Mr. Fagan retired, less than a week after he and his son were involved in what police called a drunken fracas in a hotel in Scottsdale, Ariz.

Friends said Mr. Fagan should not be remembered for his part in a scandal but for his love of San Francisco and the high morale he brought to the city's force.

"He was one of those guys who could do a million great things and then stub his toe a little bit," said Ron Brooks, who once investigated drug cases alongside Mr. Fagan and is now the director of the Northern California Regional Intelligence Center. "But

having worked with him for 25, 30 years, he was a great cop and a great friend. He was 100 percent loyal, not only to his friends but to the city."

San Francisco comedian Mike Pritchard said Mr. Fagan, a fellow member of the Guardsmen, a nonprofit that helps disadvantaged youth, "was in a really good place in his life, very happy, and this is a very hard story to hear."

Mr. Fagan spent much of his childhood in western Contra Costa County. He graduated with honors from UC Berkeley, where he wrestled and studied criminology. He joined the Police Department in 1973, overseeing the force's budget and, as a captain, running Northern Station - where he met Brown.

Asked about Fagan's missteps, Brown said, "When you are a true cop in San Francisco, you run the risk of that. It's part of the character of the city."

Alex Fagan Sr. served on San Francisco's police force for 31 years.



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