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One Woman Fights the System

by Margaret Tearman

Teresa Chambers wears her patriotism in plain sight. Her sweater is red, white and blue. A small American flag is pinned, perhaps deliberately, over her heart. The souvenir pens she hands out are emblazoned with the stars and stripes. And July 4, 2002 —back when she was Chief Chambers, the woman in charge of the United States Park Police — is one of Chambers' favorite memories.



"This was the first Fourth of July after 9/11. I realized I was a voice for the country in bringing people back to D.C. in the face of terrorism," she recalls. "When I was walking the parade route, three people came up to me and said they had been terrified to come to D.C. But after they saw me on TV, talking about how my father would bring me down to the National Mall to visit the museums and national monuments, they grabbed their grandchildren and jumped on a plane. They told me they were here because of me. To serve my country this way was just awesome."

Not so visible in this small, tidy, 47-year-old woman is another quality that seems bred in blood and bone. If you pick a fight with her, you had better be prepared to be in it for the long haul. Chambers is one determined woman, always has been.

Determination is the theme of another of her favorite stories. Standing just shy of five feet, four inches, 19-year-old Chambers didn't meet the height requirements for joining the Prince George's County Police Department. Chambers would not let fractions of an inch derail her ambitions. She practiced "standing tall" and did "stretching exercises" until she achieved her goal: a full five foot, four inches and acceptance as a rookie cop.

Twenty-four years later, the determined cop stretched to the top of her aspirations. In February, 2002, she was named chief of the U.S. Park Police. Her appointment was a milestone, both for her and the park police. She was the first woman — and the first outsider — to achieve that rank in the agency's 200-year history.

"It was an honor," Chambers told Bay Weekly. "It is the best law-enforcement job in the world. I rediscovered the patriotism that was instilled in me as a little girl. I never knew how important it was to me until I had the chance to compete for this job. It's an honor to wear this uniform."

Chambers' world was perfect. Unstinting devotion paid off. Hard work brought high rewards. Proud and patriotic, she stood tall alongside President George W. Bush in making America's hallowed places safe. Forty-four-year-old Teresa Chambers was at the top of her game. Or so it seemed.



"If it's green, it's ours," Chambers said of the Park Police. They are responsible for protecting national monuments, parkways and federal parkland in Washington, D.C., New York City and San Francisco, including Golden Gate Park in San Francisco as well as the National Mall, the White House, Ellis Island and more.

Princess Chronicles

How did the Maryland girl with neither star power nor political connections rise to be the chief of the U.S. Park Police?

As Chambers steadily worked her way up through the ranks in Prince George's County, she remembers a piece of advice offered early on: "Don't try to be a policeman, I was told. I learned I should work to find my own strengths as a policewoman."

For a policewoman in the 1970s, role models were hard to come by. There was Angie Dickinson in *Police Woman* but, as Chambers points out, even

Angie had her limitations. "She chased the bad guys, but when she got to the fence, she couldn't climb over it wearing a skirt and high heels. She was almost an equal, but not quite."

In the 1970s, women weren't cut out for police work. Even the uniforms told that story. "I would grab the smallest one available, and even it was way too big," Chambers remembers. "I had to take all my uniforms to my personal tailor to make them fit." When women's uniforms were introduced, Chambers said they still didn't fit. "The uniforms were designed for women by men. The neck and chest were still too big."

A woman in a male-dominated police department, Chambers was treated differently, "but not in a negative way," she says. "Being a woman I wasn't part of the club. I'd walk up and conversation would stop. These were the same men who helped me achieve rank, but I don't think they expected me to catch up with them, let alone pass them."

But Chambers did just that, and her career with Prince George's County police flourished. In 1978, she graduated from police cadet to police officer. Looking at a picture of herself as that young cadet, Chambers says "I was having the time of my life and was content in my choice of profession." Ranks of corporal, sergeant, and lieutenant followed in quick succession. In 1990, Chambers made captain. Elated, she remembers thinking, "Wow, now I get to see what happens behind closed doors, like a kid sneaking into a PTA meeting."

At the same time, Chambers was seeking a higher calling. She could "stay in Prince George's County and hope to be noticed," she says, or start looking elsewhere. So after 21 "good years" with Prince George's, Chambers retired. Her next step was Raleigh-Durham, where she'd be chief of police.

Chambers' husband, Jeff, had by now retired from his own career in law enforcement. The new chief became, in her words, "his full time job."

The Chambers sold their Maryland home, including a Calvert County weekend cabin in Holland Cliffs. In Raleigh-Durham, Chambers says, she was "welcomed with open arms." In three years there, Chambers says she reduced crime and staff turnover while improving morale. Formal grievances dropped from 21 a year to zero. The community became a safer place for its citizens as crime fell by 29 percent.

"The greatest satisfaction came from changing the way we collectively thought about the city," she says. "We went from a time when officers and elected officials would react to a violent crime with defeat saying, Well, that's just Durham, to a time when officers, elected officials and community leaders were more apt to say, violent crime is not tolerated here; we're better than that."

Good as life in Raleigh-Durham was, it wasn't Chambers' final destination. "Police chiefs usually

only last three to five years since they are hired by political appointees,” Chambers explains. “I was at the three-year mark, and I was always told smart chiefs leave at the top of their act. So she began “nosing around, doing some web-crawling” for job opportunities. Returning to Maryland was her goal, not only to be close to her aging parents, but because it was “home.”

Queen for Two Years

Back home in Maryland, Chambers had built a good buddy network. But it wasn't connections that brought her home. Instead, she found her calling on a federal government job website. The position of Chief of U.S. Park Police had never before been opened to applicants outside the federal government. Chambers took that as a sign. “This is the one to go for,” she told herself.



One of some 60 applicants, she interviewed on a November Friday in 2001.

After the interview, she was headed back to Raleigh-Durham when she got the call to “come back on Monday” to meet with the National Park Service director, Fran Minella. Chambers said she “turned around and came back to D.C.” Now she recalls Director Minella’s closing words after the second interview: “I think we’ve found our chief.”

Chambers, center, was sworn in as Chief of U.S. Park Police by Secretary of the Interior Gail Norton, right, with National Park Service Director Fran Minella at her other side. “The guys at work called us the “power chicks,” Chambers recalled.

Chambers remembers the day of her “coronation” with great pride. With Minella, the first female director of the National Park Service, by her side, Chambers was sworn in by Gail Norton, the first woman Secretary of the Interior. Bagpipes played as the new chief reviewed her troops.

Those memories are preserved in a photograph taken that day of Chief Chambers, Secretary Norton and Director Minella. “We're walking down the steps of the National Museum of Natural History, standing tall and proud, three females, making history. The guys at work called us the “power chicks,” Chambers recalls.

Happy to be back home in Maryland, the Chambers chose Calvert County as their full-time residence. “We love the slower pace,” Chambers says. “When I cross the county line, it’s like a breath of fresh air, and I’m instantly relaxed.” Their move to Huntingtown added 24 miles to her D.C. commute, but every mile was worth it, she says.

Chief Chambers was living her dream. Still in law enforcement, but now serving her country instead of just her community, her patriotism was never stronger. Relating one of her vivid memories of those good old days, Chamber’s voice fills with emotion: “On September 11, 2002, I stood on Ellis Island just a few feet from President Bush. As I saluted him, I could see the Statue of Liberty over his shoulder. I had goosebumps, and I thought I can’t believe I’m getting paid to do this.”

The United States Park Police is the urban branch of law enforcement in the National Park Service. Chambers describes its range as “if it’s green, it’s ours.” The Park Police are responsible for protecting national monuments, parkways and federal parkland in Washington, D.C., New York City and San Francisco. Their jurisdiction includes the National Mall and monuments, Lafayette Park, the White House, Suitland Parkway and Baltimore-Washington Parkway in D.C.; Ellis Island, Liberty Island and Federal Hall in New York City; and Golden Gate Regional Park in San Francisco. The force, she says, is “a little gnat in a huge environmental organization, the Department of Interior.” With over 600 officers, it covers a lot of ground. And water.

Her force included helicopters, as well. Those are the Eagles that hovered in the smoky skies above the Pentagon after the jet strike of September 11.

Early in May 2002, an Eagle took on a different kind of job. Seven bald eagle chicks were found stuck on a muddy spit of land in Charles County. Unable to reach them by boat, Maryland's Department of Natural Resources called on the Park Police helicopter, Eagle 1, to assist. Hovering over the stranded chicks, park police officers plucked them, one by one out of the mud to fly them to the Baltimore Zoo for rehabilitation. Chambers joined Gov. Parris Glendening and a host of local officials and wildlife biologists at Sandy Point State Park when the four surviving eagles were released back to the wild on Memorial Day.

"It was a great day, a real celebration," Chambers remembers. "It's 98 degrees and I'm in full dress uniform. But it's what we live for. It is such an honor to be a part of something so wonderful."

The chief's job is not all pomp and fanfare. Chambers was in charge on March 17, 2003, when Dwight Watson, a tobacco farmer from North Carolina, drove his farm tractor into the reflecting pool of the National Mall. Protesting the cutting of federal tobacco subsidies, Watson, dubbed Tractor Man by the press, threatened to detonate explosives if police approached. The Park Police, working with the FBI, barricaded the area. Nearby government buildings were evacuated and major traffic arteries were closed, causing massive traffic jams. Because Watson had chosen such a high-profile area in the aftermath of 9/11, he became national news.

When the two-day stand-off was peacefully resolved and Watson was led away in handcuffs and not in an ambulance, Chief Chambers and the Park Police were widely applauded for their handling of the potential disaster. "Mr. Watson was a troubled man who was seeking a way to air his grievances," Chambers said. "While the Park Police regrets that motorists were inconvenienced, no traffic tie-up can justify the taking of a human life."

Chambers has saved an e-mail she received two days after the incident from Craig Manson, the assistant secretary of Fish, Wildlife and Parks at the Interior Department: "It's good to know we have employees who take the time to recognize and appreciate the efforts of law enforcement," he wrote. "And may I add my personal thanks for resolving the situation without the need to resort to deadly force. A truly professional and collaborative effort."



In the aftermaths of 9-11, the Park Police's Eagle helicopters helped patrol Washington's skies as the air traffic controllers could not see from the tower because of the heavy smoke.

The Kingdom Crashes Down

As chief, Chambers' job included talking to the press as spokeswoman for the Park Police. It's a job she did routinely and with confidence, although she says she was never coached in a party line or directed about policy. "If there was a message, I was never told what it was," Chambers says. But in November, 2003, Chambers was to give her last interview as chief.

Speaking to The Washington Post on November 20, Chambers noted that scarce resources left her concerned over the safety of citizens and her officers. The interview appeared on December 2, 2003, under the headline "Park Police Duties Exceed Staffing." In it, Chambers is quoted as saying, "My greatest fear is that harm or death will come to a visitor or employee at one of our parks, or that we're going to miss a key thing at one of our icons."

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Department of Homeland Security had ordered the Park Police to add protection around the monuments, increasing the number of officers standing watch from two to four. Chambers told The Post "There are not enough of us to go around to protect those spaces anymore," and said that her 620-member force would need to expand to 1,400 officers to satisfy the order. Chambers went on to say the Park Police was inadequately funded, leaving a budget shortfall of "\$12 million."

Chambers insists she said nothing improper or "out of line." She still wonders what went wrong.

"It was not really different from any other interviews I had held in the past," Chambers says. "In fact, my press officer and I were almost giddy with how well we had crafted our message." Apparently, her superiors did not agree. Chambers says she "could not have imagined" the events that followed.

Chambers recalls the first signs of trouble. "There had been a change in [her supervisor, National Park Service deputy director] Donald Murphy's behavior in the few weeks leading up to December 5," she says. "It seemed he was distant and difficult to communicate with."

Chambers didn't think too much of it until a conference call on November 26 during which she says "He acted in such an inappropriate manner that I felt it necessary to say something to his supervisor, [Park Service director] Fran Minella."

Chambers put her complaint in writing to Minella on December 2, 2003. "Three hours later I received a gag order from Don Murphy," Chambers says. "He left two voice mails and an email directing me to have no contact with the media and requested I attend a meeting with him and Director Minella on December 3." The meeting was rescheduled for December 5.

When Chambers arrived, she says, "Director Minella wasn't there." Instead "Murphy handed me a memo" that said she was being placed on "administrative leave."

"He's going to be in big trouble when [his bosses] find out what he's doing," Chambers recalls thinking. "I really expected that it would all be over by Monday, if it even took that long."

But Chambers' expectations of a quick resolution were dashed. Instead, she was "stripped of her badge and gun and escorted out of the building by armed National Park Service Special Agents.

"Murphy refused to tell me what I did wrong, so I could only assume it was in retaliation for the complaint I submitted to Minella earlier in that week," Chambers says. "It wasn't until sometime later that I learned it was, by his own admission, in retaliation for information I had confirmed with The Washington Post and a conversation I had had with a congressional staffer."

The events that followed still confound Chambers. On December 12, National Park Service representatives and Chambers, along with her attorneys, met "at a secret location." She says she still hadn't been told of any of the charges against her. The National Park Service nonetheless offered to dismiss them all if she would agree to "certain stipulations and directives from Donald Murphy." Chambers refused, saying she felt it would "take away my executive decision-making authority, illegally restrict my First Amendment rights and the right to freely communicate with Congress."

On December 17, 2003, Chambers received written notice of her proposed dismissal. "This is notice that I propose to remove you from your position as Chief, U.S. Park Police," Murphy wrote, listing six violations, including "making improper remarks regarding security on the Federal Mall, and in parks and on the Parkways in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area."

Additional alleged violations included "improper budget communications," "improper lobbying" and "failure to carry out a supervisor's instructions." Chambers maintains this was the first notification she received of the charges against her.

Insisting the charges against her were "preposterous," Chambers appealed the dismissal to the Federal Merit Systems Protection Board. The charges of improper budget disclosure and lobbying were dismissed by the board, but it upheld the other four. In her decision against Chambers, Elizabeth Bogle, administrative judge for the board, concluded "Offenses are inconsistent with the degree of trust required for her position. Moreover, because the appellant has accepted no responsibility for her conduct and has expressed no remorse, her reinstatement would impair the agency's ability to carry out its law enforcement mission."

On October 6, 2004, Chief Chambers was officially released from duty.

Chambers responded to the ruling with typical optimism and determination. "While I knew we had a rock-solid case, I also knew it was unusual for an employee to prevail at a hearing in front of an administrative judge," she says. "I was pleased when Judge Bogle dismissed two of the administrative charges. While I was disappointed she did not dismiss the remaining four charges and upheld the termination, I saw this as a first step in the appeal process as taking us one-third of the way to total vindication."

Chambers filed an appeal with the Federal Merit Protection Board for "immediate reinstatement" on December 15, 2004. She is still awaiting the results, expecting a decision this month.

Battling for the Throne

In the immediate aftermath of her dismissal, devastation competed with shock to overwhelm a woman whose life had been her career and whose career was devoted to maintaining the rule of order. Looking at a picture of her with President Bush taken when she was still chief, Chambers reflects, "I went from these types of opportunities to total abandonment. It's hard to grasp."

Like a character in a Kafka story, Chambers says she still doesn't know what hit her. Was it a series of accumulated faults? Was it naivete? Or had she insubordinately failed to uphold the White House message?

During those first dark days of displacement, Chambers says she avoided going out in public. "I was embarrassed," she says. "I lost my salary, my self-esteem. We were so depressed we couldn't bring ourselves to even put up a Christmas tree."

After the shock wore off, Chambers' habitual determination took over. She launched a full-time campaign to get her job back. Not only did she appeal the Merit Protection Board's decision, she also sought protection under the Whistleblower Act and filed a Federal lawsuit over a "missing 2004 performance review" that she believes will prove her competence and dismiss Murphy's charges of insubordination. (The performance review "mysteriously reappeared" in early March, 2005, but Chambers says she has yet to receive a copy.)

When the chief's job was posted on the government web site, Chambers submitted her application. "To this day, nobody has yet to tell me what I was supposed to have done differently in The Post interview," she says. Chambers says she does not want a financial settlement. All she wants is to "wear the chief's hat once again."

Teresa Chambers is not alone in her fight. Her husband Jeff has started a web site, HonestChief.com, to document her case and lobby for public support. Chambers says they've received "over 50,000 e-mails from all over the world" in support of their efforts.

The fight is a "16- to 18-hour-a-day job," says Chambers, who vows they "won't rest until my name has been cleared and my honor and integrity restored."

This ordeal has become her life. She says it's taken an enormous toll on her family, but "their unending support and dedication is what gets me through the hardest days. I couldn't do it without them."

Neither she nor her husband now earns a salary. "If Jeff and I tried to supplement our income right now, the case would suffer," she says. With finances stretched thin, they are grateful for outside help. [Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility](http://PublicEmployeesforEnvironmentalResponsibility), a non-profit alliance of law enforcement and environmental professionals, has established [The Honest Chief Fund](http://TheHonestChiefFund) and is soliciting contributions to, as they say, "help pay the rising legal costs of the campaign to return Chief Teresa Chambers to work."

Chambers says the fund is “set up in a manner so that donors remain anonymous to me,” so she will “never know the names of contributors.”

In exile, Chambers has become Chesapeake Country’s reluctant celebrity. She’d rather continue as one of Calvert’s many D.C. commuters, driving up Suitland Parkway to her Park Police office in Haines Point. Still, she finds support in her chosen hometown. Her Huntingtown neighbors, she says, “are respectful of my privacy but have been very supportive.” When she did venture out in public, Chambers was surprised to find supporters all around. She remembers when “a complete stranger came up to me, gave me a bear hug and told me to Give ’em hell. Don’t let them get away with this.”

Last month, on March 28, the Park Police announced the appointment of a new chief. It is not Teresa Chambers. The ending to this story has apparently been written, but it’s not a plot to Chambers’ liking. While she awaits the final decision from the Merit Systems Protection Board, she still believes that history can be rewritten, still insists she has a chance to get her job back. And she hasn’t given up her fight.

“The Merit Systems Protection Board can return me to my position, even if the Park Service fills the position with someone else,” Chambers says. The recently named chief can be “bumped back to another position or handled in any manner the agency sees fit.”

What will she do if she fails? At that, Chambers hesitates. She doesn’t have “any back-up plan, except to serve my country.”

About the Author

Documentary filmmaker Margaret Tearman of Huntingtown returns to Bay Weekly with her second feature story. Her last story was “Calvert Artists Showcase Makes New Friends over Good Music” on March 3.