

John “Jack” Cunningham, Chief of Police 1975-1979

In Nov. 1975 City Manager Ralph Bowers selected veteran police officer, 53 year old John W. Cunningham, to take over as Chief of Police after Chief Marvin Pittman was fired. Chief Cunningham, although not a veteran of Bartow Police Department had previously worked as Chief of Police at the Clewiston Police Department, but was fired for unknown reasons.

In Aug. 1978, State Attorney Quillian Yancey opened an investigation into allegations of “official misconduct” under Florida statutes. The allegations had been reported to the State Attorney by members of the Bartow Police Dept. one of those being Major Roy McKinsey, second in command at that time. Major McKinsey, was then fired by Chief Cunningham for insubordination.

Newspapers reported low moral among all members of the department. In March 1979, there was an investigation into the department by city attorneys George Dunlap and Monte Campbell, and they concluded:

“It is our opinion that the lack of confidence is so great that the present chief of police no longer has the ability to exert the management necessary and proper ability to further the best interests of the Bartow Police Department”.

The investigation also revealed that city Manager Ralph Bowers must share part of the blame for the problems in the police department. On March 7, 1979 Chief Cunningham resigned, claiming that the growing demands of the police union was causing him strife, and he claimed that organized blackmail was occurring in Bartow.

After the resignation of Cunningham, Charles Fleming, a Bartow Police veteran officer was selected as new Chief of Police to replace Chief Cunningham.

