

The role of cops and robbers in *The Big Heat*

From time to time in *film noir* the line dividing the police from the criminals seems to blur. That is not the case in *The Big Heat*. In *The Big Heat* the line separating the police from the criminals is clearly delineated. In the story the police are afraid to assert themselves not because they are tied in with gangsters but because the police commissioner, who is an appointed official and not a professional police officer, is tied in with the mob. They don't want to do anything that will cross the commissioner and jeopardize their pensions. Nevertheless, the police follow Bannion's lead and join him in his one-man vendetta against the sadistic Vince Stone and his boss, Mike Lagana. The presence of the ex-GIs further accentuates the divide between the two factions. The American GI is a metaphor for goodness, strength and courage. The ex-GI who drove a 50-ton tank in World War Two is one of the good guys.

Detective Sergeant Dave Bannion is an iconic character. He sets the standard for future movie law enforcement fighters: Virgil Tibbs, Buford Pusser, John Spartan, Frank Serpico, Alex Murphy, Eliot Ness, Daniel Ciello, Martin Riggs, Roger Murtaugh, John McClane, and Harry Callahan. Like Bannion, these cinematic heroes are incorruptible, which sets them apart from the criminals. They are readily distinguishable from the bad guys. They are heroes, not anti-heroes. To equate the police with the criminals is like comparing the American soldier in World War Two to the SS because they fought each other on the same battlefield. Dave Bannion puts his life on the line not for money, but as a matter of principle. Bannion and the other heroes mix with criminals because of the nature of their work, and when they resort to violence, it's only because they have to, not because they want to.