

The Story Behind the Signal 5-5-5-5

by Herb Eysser

The signal 5-5-5-5 is deeply rooted in the tradition and history of the FDNY. Years ago it was transmitted over the fire alarm telegraph circuits by dispatchers. Using the telegraph key (much like the Morse Code key) the dispatcher sent the signal to each firehouse by way of the old bell system. This alerted the department to the death of a member killed in the line of duty or a member who died while serving in the U.S. Armed Forces.



It also is sent upon the death of a prominent government official or distinguished citizen, upon the approval of the Fire Commissioner and Chief of Department.

Upon receipt of the signal, the officer on duty shall cause display of the National Flag at half staff at quarters (time of day being a factor) and have it remain until sunset of the day of the funeral or until such time as designated in department orders.

In the 1970s, as the old system was being phased out, the signal 5-5-5-5 began to be sent over the voice alarm and computer.

It is still the one message that causes this great department to be momentarily stilled upon receipt.