

Striking the Four Fives

The sound of a bell holds special significance for firefighters. Historically, the toll of a bell summoned members to the station, signaled the beginning of a shift, notified departments of a call for help, and indicated a call was completed and the unit had returned to the station.

Departments also sounded a series of bells when a firefighter died in the line of duty to alert all members that a comrade had made the ultimate sacrifice.

One of the most meaningful series of bells is commonly called “Striking the Four Fives”. The fire service is rich with ceremony, custom, and tradition. Our custom of rendering final honors has its origins in the fire department of the City of New York, where many years ago, long before the advent of radios or pagers, fire alarms and daily announcements were dispatched from central headquarters to outlying firehouses by a system of bell commands and telegraph.

Each different type of alarm or announcement would have its own number and series of bell strikes. When a firefighter died in the line of duty or when some important official or personage died, headquarters would transmit five bell strikes, repeated in four series, with a slight pause between each series, followed by the announcement. This was done as long ago as 1865 in the New York City Fire Department to inform the rank and file of the death of President Abraham Lincoln. The custom has continued down to the present day.

I ask that you please rise, if you are able, and remain standing in place until seated by my command.

(BELL STRIKES – “Striking of the Four Fives”)

The signal 5-5-5-5 has been transmitted. It is with regret that we announce the deaths of these faithful servants who we gather here today to memorialize.

Hand salute!

(Followed by “Taps”)