

# **FINAL FAREWELL TO A FALLEN FIREFIGHTER:**

## **A BASIC FIRE DEPARTMENT FUNERAL PROTOCOL**

**BY WILLIAM C. PETERS**



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Fellow Firefighters:

A firefighter's death in the line of duty is a very traumatic event for the member's relatives as well as the fire department "family." On these tragic and usually sudden occasions, there are many details to consider to honor the fallen comrade with a proper fire department burial.

Fortunately, most of us don't have to plan and coordinate these ceremonies with any regularity. However, it is because of this infrequency that we experience much confusion and uncertainty when we do have to plan a funeral.

The following basic outline was used in rapid succession for two line-of-duty deaths that occurred within 10 days of each other in two New Jersey communities. It consists primarily of two parts: (1) the preparations and considerations before the funeral and (2) the ceremonial portion of the services. This basic plan is flexible enough to be used in its present form, or it can be customized to suit the individual situation.

In larger metropolitan departments, protocol may differ because of the department's experience in planning this event and the greater number of personnel attending the funeral. The information provided here is primarily for the small or moderate-size department, which may not have the personnel familiar with the process and fortunately may not have to deal with it very often.

I sincerely hope that the majority of you will never have to refer to this booklet, but knowing the fire service as I do, I am sure that it will be used. My goal in formulating this protocol is that in a time of need, it will provide the basic information required to help guide the unfamiliar funeral planner through a very difficult process.

It is with deep respect that I dedicate this publication to Firefighter Carlos A. Negron of the Jersey City (NJ) Fire Department and Firefighter Lewis L. Sheats of the Chatham Township (NJ) Volunteer Fire Department, who made the supreme sacrifice in the line of duty in 1993.

Fraternally,  
William C. Peters

## THE FAMILY'S DESIRES

The first consideration in planning a fire department funeral is determining the family's wishes. Depending on such variables as the family's religious beliefs, medical constraints, and general state of mind, the role of the fire department could vary from serving as a simple honor guard at the funeral prior to providing a full departmental funeral.

A member of the fire department who is a relative or close friend of the family, a union officer, or an official of a fraternal organization can serve as a liaison between the family and the chief's office.

## THE PLANNING PROCESS

As soon as you have determined the family's wishes, conduct a planning meeting with an appointed committee, or, in the case of a career department, all available staff personnel. There are so many details to address in such a short period of time that you will need ample assistance. Name personnel to the following positions to coordinate each segment of the operation:

- *Officer in charge of operations (OIC)*. This is the person in charge of the overall arrangements—the chief or another individual selected to perform these duties. Coordinating activities with the funeral director and the chaplain (or clergy member) is part of the OIC's duties, as this information will be necessary to complete the remainder of the planning process. The OIC also must address any problems that arise to ensure a smooth-running operations.
- *Liaison to family*. Continuous coordination with and assistance for the family members are absolutely essential. This is a very delicate time for them; keep them informed of all phases of the funeral services, and make sure you address their needs.



- *Logistics.* The logistics officer is charged with preparing apparatus, vehicles, equipment, and facilities for the funeral ceremonies and the large number of anticipated visitors. Make provisions for handling various immediate expenses in advance.
- *Public information.* The media usually are quite interested in covering the funeral of a fallen firefighter. It is important to supply them with accurate information about the funeral arrangements as well as background information about the member's family, time on the job, previous awards, and so on. For continuity, all press releases and information should come from the same public information officer. (Avoid going into great detail about the accident until a complete investigation has been conducted.)
- *Police Liaison.* A great deal of coordination with the local police department is required for escort service, traffic control, street closings, and posting "No Parking" signs. If the funeral home, church, or cemetery is in another community, planning between the fire department and that community's police is essential.
- *Liaison to public officials and other city agencies.* The communities governing officials naturally will want to be kept apprised of the arrangements and probably will want to participate in the service. Other agencies such as public works and the recreation department (for buses and other vehicles) might be involved as well.
- *Officer in charge honor guard.* The OIC honor guard is responsible for selecting, setting up, and supervising all details of the pallbearers, color guard, and honor guard. This individual should have some military bearing and be able to issue strong verbal commands during the ceremonies.

## **FUNERAL HOME HONOR GUARD**

One of the first duties is to arrange for an honor guard during the viewing hours at the funeral home. The honor guard OIC should coordinate this with the funeral director and schedule the honor guard according to the director's wishes. Observe the following basic rules:

1. Arrange to have an honor guard of two firefighters posted at the casket at all times during viewing hours.
2. Assign a minimum of four members for each set of viewing hours.
3. Recruit honor guards from volunteers or on-duty personnel, if necessary. If using volunteers, formulate a schedule of personnel who commit to specific shifts. This important duty cannot be left to personnel who *might* be available at the funeral home.

4. Rotate honor guards at 15-minute intervals. Relief personnel should march up together. Posted guards will come to attention and smartly make reliefs. The relieved guards also should march off together.
5. Posted honor guards should assume the position of parade rest.
6. Post American and departmental flags at the casket.
7. Have honor guards wear dress uniforms with white gloves.
8. Have honor guards cover their badges with black mourning bands.



## **FUNERAL PLANNING**

When planning the funeral, obtaining the following information will help you properly organize the services:

- The name, address, and phone number of the funeral home.
- The church or other location where services are to be held.
- The chaplain or clergy member's wishes for the services.
- The route from the funeral home to the church.
- The location of the cemetery.
- The route to the cemetery.
- Whether apparatus will be used as a hearse.

It is possible that the funeral or church services will be held in a community other than the city in which the firefighter served. This certainly complicates the process, as all of the planning steps have to be coordinated with officials and agencies of the involved jurisdiction. It is helpful to have representatives of both the fire and police departments of the involved community present at the planning meeting to give their input.

Depending on the location, the size of the fire department contingent, the distance involved, and the possible time constraints, you must determine whether it would be practical for the members to march from the funeral home to the church (if services are to be held there).

A large contingent of visiting firefighters probably will want to attend the funeral. Getting your department members and visitors from the funeral home to the church and assembling them for the arrival of the procession is difficult and time-consuming. If a church service is planned, instruct visitors to report directly to the church for assembly prior to the arrival of the funeral procession. If the procession is to march from the funeral home to the church, *only* department members should report to the funeral home.

If marching the entire distance to the church is impractical, department members can assemble several blocks from the church. Then, as the funeral procession approaches, the contingent can line up and march the remaining distance to the church.

If a church service is not planned, instruct all members and visitors to report to the funeral home for final assembly and salute.





## CONSIDERATIONS

Once you have established basic procedures, you must address individual considerations. Evaluate each of the following for its relevance to your situation, and make adjustments particular to your location where necessary.

1. Select the following personnel to command each sector of the funeral procession; name one as the overall coordinator: OIC honor guard, OIC fire department assembly point (if used), OIC church assembly point, and OIC funeral home assembly point.
2. Use portable radios for communication and information coordination with each sector.
3. Use bullhorns or vehicle loudspeakers to give directions at assembly areas.
4. Have flags and equipment ready for the color guard to use.
5. If a piece of apparatus is to be used as a hearse, select which one and prepare it as follows.
  - a. Clean and wax it.
  - b. Remove hose and dividers.
  - c. Add mourning flags.
  - d. Have the chauffeur in dress uniform.

In the event of inclement weather, use an enclosed hearse for the casket and the apparatus for a flower car.

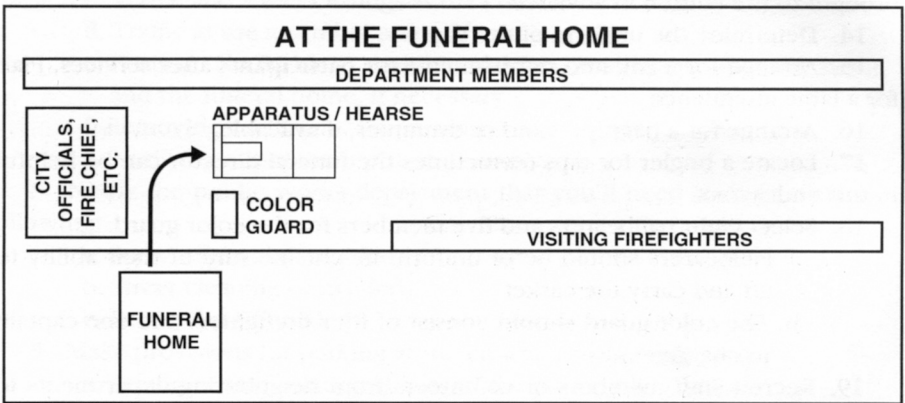
6. Hang mourning bunting at fire headquarters, at the deceased member's firehouse, and at any other firehouse on the funeral route.
7. Notify the police department that you'll need its help with the following:
  - a. Funeral escort.
  - b. Traffic and street closings at the funeral home.
  - c. Traffic and street closings at the church.
  - d. Traffic at the assembly point (if used).
  - e. Posting "No Parking" signs around the church, the assembly point, and the funeral home, if necessary.
  - f. Removing cars from "No Parking" zones.
  - g. Notifying out-of-town police, if involved.
8. Notify the public works department that you'll need its help with the following:
  - a. Snow removal (if needed).
  - b. Street cleaning (if needed).
  - c. Barricades (if needed).

9. Make provisions for parking at the church or assembly point.
  - a. Arrange transportation (buses) if the parking is remote.
  - b. Post signs directing incoming visitors to parking and the assembly point.
  - c. Request that visiting fire departments not bring apparatus, as parking and security could become problems.
10. Serve coffee or other refreshments at the church or assembly point.
  - a. Arrange for canteen services (Salvation Army, Red Cross, etc.).
  - b. Utilize a church hall or nearby school.
11. Provide rest room facilities, especially at assembly points. Consider portable units, if necessary. Also, local businesses might be cooperative and offer the use of their facilities.
12. If the funeral procession passes the member's firehouse, assembled members should toll a muffled bell.
13. Have vehicles available at the church to transport the color guard and pallbearers to the cemetery. Make sure vehicles are cleaned and waxed and brought to the church in advance.
14. Determine the uniform of the day.
15. Arrange for a hall and refreshments for participants after services. Plan for a large attendance.
16. Arrange for a bagpipe band or drummer, if available.
17. Locate a bugler for taps (sometimes the funeral director can be helpful in this endeavor).
18. Select eight pallbearers and five members for the color guard.
  - a. Pallbearers should be of uniform height. Be sure of their ability to lift and carry the casket.
  - b. The color guard should consist of four firefighters and one captain in charge.
19. Recruit staff members or volunteers from neighboring departments to assist with giving directions, coordinating personnel, and serving refreshments.
20. Arrange for mutual aid, if necessary, to cover the community's fire response during the funeral.
21. Have the information officer provide the assembly time and location to police and fire dispatchers so that they can properly direct incoming calls. Have handouts containing this information, as well as a map, if necessary, available at the funeral home to give to the visitors.
22. Have emergency medical services available during the funeral to handle medical emergencies.

## CEREMONIES

The following personnel are needed to conduct the ceremonial portion of the funeral: a chief in charge, eight pallbearers, a color guard of four firefighters and one captain, and a bugler or piper.

Due to the serious nature of pallbearer and color guard duties, hold a practice session the day before the funeral, if possible. If not, it is imperative that these personnel report to the funeral home several hours before the beginning of the service for a protocol briefing and practice. Have the funeral director give instructions on how to handle the casket. The participants must know what is expected of them, and they must be able to perform their tasks with minimal supervision.



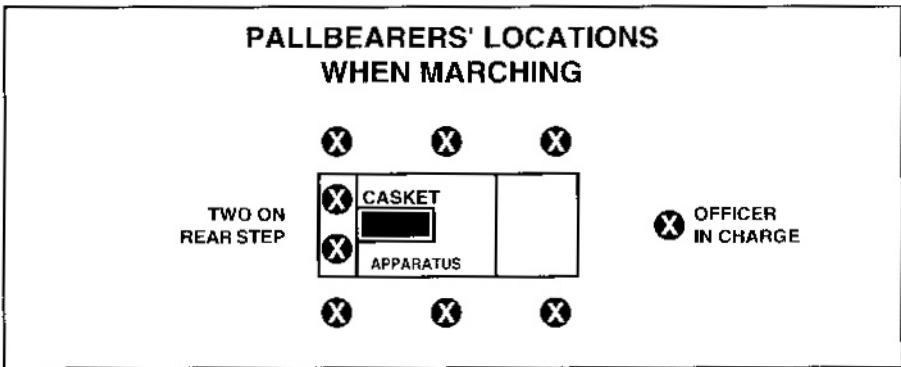
### Leaving the Funeral Home.

1. The apparatus is stationed in front of the funeral home with rollers (from the funeral home) installed in the hosebed.
2. The color guard lines up to one side.
3. Fire department officials and dignitaries line up opposite the color guard.
4. If marching from the funeral home to the church or going directly to the cemetery, fire department personnel line up on the opposite side of the street, facing center. Visiting firefighters line up on the near side.
5. Eight pallbearers prepare to carry the coffin from the funeral home to the rear of the apparatus.
6. The OIC gives the following commands: "Detail, attention" followed by "Present arms" and a hand salute.

7. Pallbearers march to the rear of the apparatus/hearse to load the casket. The first two enter the hosebed to assist loading.
8. When the casket is in place, the pallbearers stand facing each other, and the OIC commands, "Detail, present arms," for a short hand salute by the pallbearers.
9. The OIC calls, "Order arms."
10. The OIC calls, "Detail, dismissed." The color guard and pallbearers assume the next position, depending on the method of transportation (marching/riding) to the church.
11. If proceeding directly to the cemetery, the OIC again commands, "Present arms" as the procession departs.
12. If it is impractical to use the street in front of the funeral home for loading the casket, the color guard and pallbearers are present for the loading ceremony while the remainder of the contingent waits out front.

### Marching from the Funeral Home to the Church

1. If marching from the funeral home to the church, members line up in the following order:
  - a. Color guard.
  - b. Pipe band/drummer.
  - c. City officials.
  - d. Fire department members by rank.
  - e. Apparatus/hearse (pallbearers march as explained below).
  - f. Family's cars.
  - g. Friends' cars.



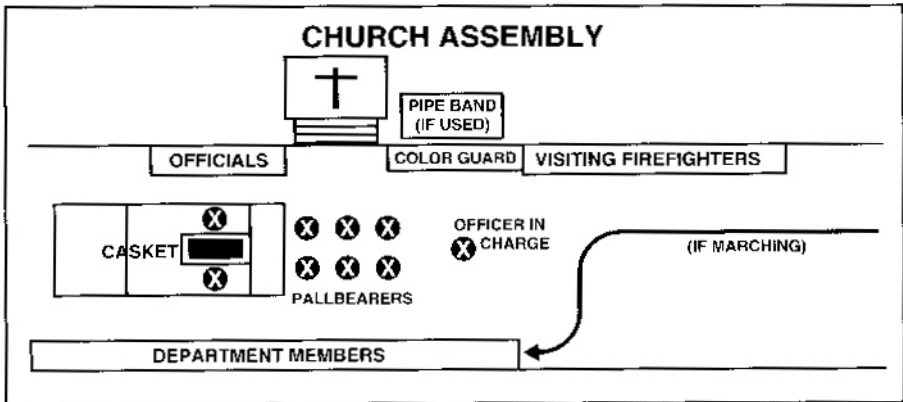
## Driving to the Church

1. Determine an assembly point several blocks from the church for fire department personnel and the pipe band.
2. The assembly point for visiting fire departments will be at the church (church side of the street).
3. Immediately after loading the casket at the funeral home, the color guard goes by van to the fire department meeting location.
4. The pallbearers board the apparatus, and three of them remain on the rear step.
5. The apparatus, with a police escort, proceeds slowly to the meeting point with the fire department contingent.
6. At that point, the procession lines up in the same order as above.
7. The pallbearers dismount and march as follows:
  - a. The OIC is in front of the apparatus.
  - b. Three pallbearers are on each side of the apparatus.
  - c. Two pallbearers ride the rear step.

## At the Church

1. As the procession nears the church, the color guard moves to the side and allows the pipe band, city officials, and fire department members to pass.
2. At the church, the pipe band assembles near the entrance.
3. City officials line up near the entrance (leaving room for the color guard).
4. When marching fire department members arrive at the church, they move to the side of the street opposite the church. When in place, the command “Right face” is given.
5. When the street is lined on both sides and all personnel are facing the center, the color guard begins to march toward the church, followed by the apparatus/hearse. Leave a space between the color guard and the hearse. The church assembly OIC commands “Present arms” (hand salute).
6. As the color guard arrives, it assembles near the front of the church.
7. The apparatus moves to the front of the church and stops. (Stop the engine.)
8. Pallbearers assemble at the rear of the apparatus, with two in the hosebed, and prepare to remove the casket.
9. The honor guard OIC commands, “Present arms” (hand salute).
10. The pipe band plays as the casket is carried to the church door. (If the chaplain performs a blessing at the rear of the apparatus, the pipe band waits until the pallbearers begin to move before playing.)

11. In the church, the pallbearers escort the casket to the front of the church, and the OIC follows.
12. Prior to dismissing personnel assembled outside, advise them of the approximate time of reassembly for departure. Then the command is given "Detail, dismissed."



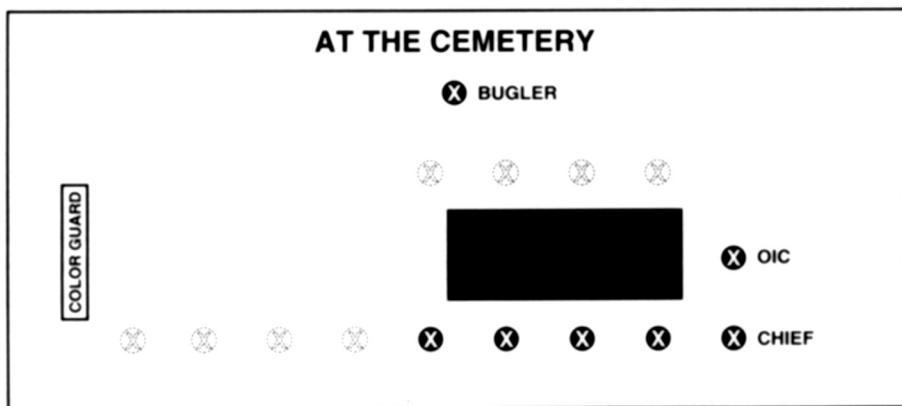
### ***Mass or Other Services are Conducted***

*Note:* The fire chief, the company commander, a friend, a union official, or a public official usually offers an appropriate eulogy. Coordinate this with the chaplain or other clergy member conducting the services.

### **Leaving the Church**

1. Fire personnel, the color guard, and the pipe band assemble outside the church prior to the end of services.
2. At the end of the services, and at the funeral director's signal, the pallbearers, followed by the OIC, move to the front of the church and escort the coffin to the rear.
3. The assembly OIC commands, "Detail, attention."
4. When the casket arrives at the rear of the church, the OIC commands, "Present arms."
5. The pipe band plays.
6. The pallbearers, led by the OIC, move slowly to the rear of the hearse/apparatus to load the casket.

7. After loading, the pallbearers line up facing each other; the OIC commands, “Detail, present arms”; and the pallbearers give a hand salute.
8. The OIC commands, “Order arms” (fire all personnel).
9. The color guard captain commands, “Detail, dismissed” (to pallbearers).
10. The pallbearers, color guard, bugler, and OIC enter waiting fire department vehicles for transportation to the cemetery.
11. The pallbearers, color guard, bugler, and OIC enter waiting fire department vehicles for transportation to the cemetery.
12. Fire personnel and city officials attending the cemetery services prepare to leave. Cemetery services are a private time for the family, so restrict attendance to only those personnel involved in the services and close friends.
13. As the funeral procession leaves, the assembly OIC orders, “Present arms” for a hand salute.
14. After the procession leaves, the OIC commands “Order arms” and “Detail, dismissed” are given.



### At the Cemetery

1. Prior to the family’s assembling, the pallbearers assemble either in a straight line parallel to the grave or four on each side, facing each other, with the chief of department at the front end.
2. The color guard assembles at the foot of the grave.
3. The bugler positions himself away from the grave and awaits the command from the OIC.

4. The funeral director drapes an American flag (if provided) over the casket or folds it in a triangular shape and places it on the coffin.
5. As the family arrives, the OIC commands, "Detail, attention."
6. The chaplain conducts the service or leads in the final prayer.
7. When finished, the OIC commands, "Present arms." A hand salute is rendered, and the color guard presents arms and dips the departmental flag.
8. The bugler plays taps.
9. At the conclusion of taps, the salute is held while the pallbearers, on signal from the OIC, fold the American flag into a triangular shape with only the blue field showing. The honor guard OIC retrieves the flag and presents it to the chief of department (or ranking officer), who in turn presents it to the family (with the fire department's condolences).
10. The honor guard OIC commands, "Order arms."
11. The funeral director gives words of thanks from the family and indicates the conclusion of the services.
12. The honor guard OIC commands, "Detail, dismissed."

## **CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS DEBRIEFING**

The line-of-duty death of a firefighter is a traumatic experience for all members of a fire department. If you haven't contacted a critical incident stress debriefing team before the funeral, request its services immediately after. After the funeral, many members may be left with an empty or helpless feeling that they subconsciously suppressed during the funeral preparations. Seek professional help to get your department through this difficult time.■



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



■ **WILLIAM C. PETERS** is battalion chief, supervisor of apparatus and equipment, and an 18-year veteran of the Jersey City (NJ) Fire Department. He is a member of the International Association of Fire Chiefs Apparatus Maintenance Section, Local 1064 of the International Association of Fire Fighters, and the *Fire Engineering* editorial advisory board.

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