

The Chief: William Feehan's Last Fire, after Four Decades on the Job

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT

The first and second alarms, which were transmitted together, sounded at 8:47 A.M., the third at 8:50. At 8:55, a 10-60 went out, signalling a major emergency, and four minutes later a fifth alarm sounded. The New York City Fire Department has no formal designation for a blaze that requires more than five alarms, but on September 11 there were five for the north tower and another five for the south tower, and still the alarms continued to ring, first in firehouses in Chelsea and Chinatown, and then in Brooklyn Heights and Williamsburg, and then all across the city, so that in less than thirty minutes more than a hundred companies had been called out. Ladder 24 was called from midtown, and Engine 214 from Bedford-Stuyvesant, and so was Squad 288 from Maspeth, Queens, and Ladder 105 from downtown Brooklyn. Even after the two towers collapsed and tens of thousands of people came streaming out of lower Manhattan covered with ash, the firemen kept coming.

That afternoon, Liz Feehan and her sister Tara waited for news together at Tara's house, in Belle Harbor, Queens. Three of the men in their family were firefighters, and all three were at the World Trade Center that day: Liz and Tara's father, William, the department's first deputy commissioner; their younger brother, John; and Tara's husband, Brian Davan. When the phone rang, Tara picked it up and started yelling. Liz immediately concluded that the call was about one of the two younger men. Their father, the second-ranking official in the FDNY, was, she assumed, too far up the hierarchy to die in the line of duty.

William Michael Feehan had joined the FDNY in 1959, and during the next forty-two years held every possible rank in a department

that was thick with them, from "proby" to lieutenant to battalion chief to commissioner — something only two or three other people have done in the department's history. Feehan helped fight some of the worst fires in New York, including the Brooklyn Navy Yard fire, in 1960, which killed fifty people, and the Madison Square blaze, in 1966, which killed twelve. For his long, distinguished career, he was venerated by his fellow firefighters, and also sometimes teased by them. "Billy," his friends used to say, "when you joined the department what were they feeding the horses?" At the time of his death, Feehan was seventy-one years old, six years past the mandatory retirement age for firefighters



in the city, and for nearly a decade he had held what is technically a civilian post. Still, he kept handy a helmet and a rubberized suit — known as "turnout gear" — and was fit, and willing, enough to help lay hose.

Before Feehan died, few outside the department or the insular world of city government had heard of him. He did not court publicity, and he rarely attended the functions that high-ranking city officials are invited to. (A favorite excuse of his was that he had tried to stop by but couldn't find a parking space.) As first deputy commissioner, Feehan served under three different commissioners and two different mayors, a tenure that testified at once to his ability and to his equanimity. "He would quietly suggest to you to do something differently, and you always knew that it was good advice, and you always took it," the current commissioner, Thomas Von Essen, told me. Even after Feehan became deputy commissioner, his men continued to address

Illustration: Fire and debris from second plane exits the World Trade Center's South Tower seconds after impact. Courtesy of CNN News.

Elizabeth Kolbert is a writer for The New Yorker. Her article on Chief William Feehan first appeared in the October 8, 2001 issue of that magazine.

Copyright © 2001. Published with permission of Elizabeth Kolbert.

him as “Chief,” a lower but, to them, more honorable title.

Feehan began his career with Ladder 3, on East Thirteenth Street in Greenwich Village. One week after the disaster, I went down to the firehouse, a squat brick building constructed under Mayor Jimmy Walker in 1929. The men in the company refer to it as Ladder 3 Recon, for “reconnaissance,” and they like to say that when rescue units get into trouble they call Ladder 3 Recon to get them out of it. The house sits next to a photo shop and across the street from a New York University dormitory. A construction-paper sign posted in one of the dorm’s windows read “NYU♥FDNY.” Normally, the men would have been upstairs, in the firehouse kitchen, cooking dinner and watching TV, but this night they were out on the street receiving condolences, as were firemen all over the city.

On September 11, Ladder 3 was called on the third alarm. The day shift was just arriving, and the night shift going off duty, which meant that there were two full crews in the house. The company lost twelve men out of a total force of twenty-five. It is still not known where, or how, they died. Someone had pasted pictures of the missing on a piece of poster board, and around this poster, which was propped on an easel, the sidewalk had been transformed into a makeshift shrine. There were dozens of bouquets with notes pinned to them, and candles flickering in pools of wax, and silver balloons, clearly designed for less grave occasions, printed with the message “Thank you.” It was six in the evening, the time when New Yorkers start to arrive home from work. People kept coming by to drop off doughnuts and cakes and homemade cookies. An elderly man brought over a plate of apples and honey, in honor of Rosh Hashanah; a woman with red and blue tinsel stars in her hair stopped in to offer the men Shiatsu massages. A woman in her forties brought a mixed bouquet. She seemed unwilling to just add it to the general pile, so she waited for one of the firemen to notice her, and handed it to him.

*Illustration:
William M. Feehan
served in the FDNY
for forty-two years.
He held every rank
in the department,
an achievement
made by few people.
He died on Sept.
11, 2002. Courtesy
of the New York
City Fire
Department.*



“You guys are the best and the bravest,” she said. Then she started to cry.

The attack on the World Trade Center left thousands of people mourning fathers and mothers, colleagues, close friends, and children. It left thousands of others, in the city and beyond, who hadn’t lost anyone, searching for a focus for their grief. In this context, it was natural for people to gravitate to their local firehouses. One former Manhattanite I know drove in from Westchester to visit the firehouse in his old neighborhood. He had brought a check for the relief fund — the company had lost nine members — and when the fireman he gave it to thanked him he had to turn away, he told me, because he found himself weeping uncontrollably. Not a single firehouse in the city was untouched by the disaster. Among the three hundred and forty-three firefighters who are either dead or missing are members of at least sixty companies.

The only men left in Ladder 3 are those who were not on duty on the morning of the eleventh. I asked one of them, a lieutenant, whether he felt fortunate to have been off that day. He told me the opposite was true. “I wish it was me instead of them,” he said, and he felt sure, he told me, that had the situation been reversed his colleagues — his “brothers” — would have felt the same way. “The camaraderie that you have with your brothers — you’d do anything for them,” he said.

William Feehan was born in Queens on September 29, 1929, and grew up in Jackson Heights. His father was a firefighter with Engine 21, and one of his uncles was a priest. In the tradition of old Irish New York, these were the career choices presented to Feehan, and although his parents tried to steer him toward the church he eventually chose the FDNY. From an early age, Feehan loved fires — he used to run down to Northern Boulevard to watch the engines go by — and in 1956, after graduating from St. John’s

University and serving in Korea, he joined the New York Fire Patrol, a private force financed by the insurance industry, which is still in operation.

At about the same time, a new FDNY commissioner, Edward Cavanagh, instituted a mandatory-retirement policy, and Feehan's father, who was sixty-seven, immediately became over-age. In 1992, the year he became first deputy commissioner, Feehan spoke about his father's disappointment in an interview with his oldest son, William, Jr., a human-resources executive, and a friend of his, Harvey Wang, a photographer. "My father lived till he was in his early eighties, and to the day he died I think he felt that Edward Cavanagh passed that bill just to hurt him," Feehan recalled. "I don't think a day went by when he didn't have something unkind to say about Edward Cavanagh for cutting his career short, in the prime of his life, and he carried that bitterness to the grave with him."

From the beginning, Feehan's solidity impressed those he worked with. James Manahan, a firefighter who trained with him, told me, "Billy really made his own reputation. In firefighting, it's crucial how you're perceived by the people you're working with, because when you go above a fire you've got to have trust in the guy that's beneath you. No one would think twice about going above Billy."

In 1956, Feehan married Betty Keegan, whom he had met, also in the tradition of Irish New York, in the Rockaways. Over the next decade, the couple had four children. They moved to a single-family house in Flushing and, because it wasn't easy to support the family on a fireman's salary, Feehan moonlighted — first as a substitute teacher and later as a security guard for the Helmsley hotels. (Whenever the kids made cracks about Leona or Harry, Feehan asked them if they wanted to take out another college loan.) He also studied hard for the department exams that determine promotions. In 1964, after just five years in the department, Feehan made lieutenant. In 1972, he became a captain, and in 1979 the chief of a battalion.

A week and a half after Feehan died, I went out to the house, on Twenty-eighth Avenue in Flushing. It is, by today's standards, modest, and following Betty's death, in 1996, Feehan continued to live there alone. The day I visited,



Liz Feehan, a slim, lively woman who works as a court clerk in Manhattan, was at the house, and so were her brother John and his wife, Debbie, who is a nurse. We sat in the dining room, at a table covered with a lace cloth, surrounded by the bags of Mass cards that had been left at Feehan's wake.

According to his children, Feehan was a man of great faith, and also of great optimism. When they were young, everything they presented to him was "the most special — fill in the blank — in the world," and, when they got older, every house or apartment they moved into was a "gem" or a "home run." "He was your biggest fan," Liz said. "Nothing could not be overcome. He'd say, 'We'll move on and get through this.'"

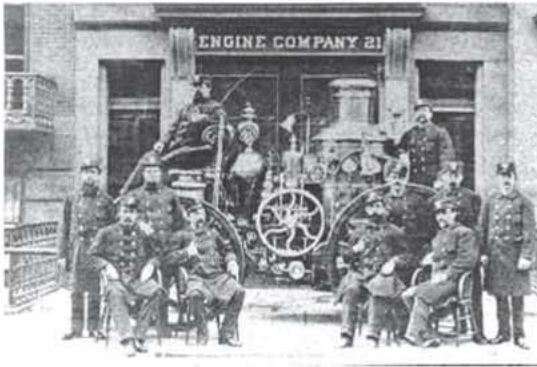
John looks a lot like the photographs of his father — the same square face and wide-set eyes. He told me that his father hadn't pushed him to become a fireman but had been relieved when he did: "He didn't know what the hell I was going to do, so he was happy that I had a job." Everyone in the department knew him as "Feehan's kid," John said. "It sounds way too pretentious, and I don't mean to be, but it was kind of like I was a prince," he told me. Often, on Saturdays, the two men would have breakfast at the North Shore Diner, in Bayside, and "talk fire." On their days off, they also liked to "buff" fires together — watch their colleagues handle a blaze and later, like a pair of critics, review it.

All of Feehan's children had felt a certain trepidation about the upcoming mayoral election and the inevitable arrival of a new administration. Their father had told them that, no matter who became mayor, he didn't think it likely that he would be asked to stay on. Liz described how

*Illustration:
Ladder 6 firehouse on
East Thirteenth Street
in Manhattan. This
was William Feehan's
first house when he was
appointed in 1959.
Courtesy of New York
City Fire Department.*

their mother, long before Feehan's retirement was even on the horizon, had worried about it: "She used to say, 'I hope your father goes in a fire.' We'd say, 'Speak for yourself.' But she meant that's how he would have wanted to go."

Feehan liked to tell stories. In the interview that he did with his son and Harvey Wang, he



told one about how he almost didn't make it into the Fire Department because of his bad eyesight, and another about the time he was a captain in Harlem and the commissioner, who had come for a visit, ended up posing for photographs with a

bookie. He also spoke about Charlie, a fire buff who lived for a while at Ladder 6, in Chinatown, and, having been convinced by the men that Feehan's wife was Chinese, was always plying him with fortune cookies.

Feehan was a member of Ladder 6 when, in 1970, the company was called to a fire at One New York Plaza, a fifty-story office building at the corner of Water and Broad Streets. The blaze killed two people, and helped bring about the passage of Local Law 5, which requires that all high-rises have sprinkler systems and fire alarms on each floor.

"When we were dispatched to the fire," Feehan recalled, "we left the firehouse heading down East Broadway, and an air line broke. We came to a dead halt and the chauffeur" — the driver of the fire truck — "jumped out and said we were out of service. I was a fairly young lieutenant and this was going to be my first high-rise fire, and there was no way that I was going to miss this fire. There was a hardware store right on the corner, so I sent a guy in, and I said, 'Get some tape,' and we taped this thing up. They called us, and said, 'Ladder 6, what's your location?' We lied and said that we were three blocks from them.

"I remember the chief of the department then was John O'Hagan. I remember him telling us to go to the floor above the fire, and see whether or not there was an access from one

floor to the next. We went up the stairway and the floor was just so hot that we couldn't crawl in. My chauffeur, who was very senior, and a very experienced guy, said, 'It's just too hot, we've got to get out of here.' We did, and we went back down and reported to Chief O'Hagan, and told him we couldn't get in on the floor, and he said, 'If you can't make it, you can't make it.' It was like a knife in your heart.

"A short time later, there was a report that there were some people on the upper floors, and we jumped up, because we were kind of depressed from not doing the other job. A guy from the building said, 'I have an elevator that will take you directly up to the top floor.' We went down to the lobby to get this elevator, and he said, 'I'm pretty sure this elevator —' We said, 'Hold it. Pretty sure is not good enough. If we're going to get on this elevator, we have to be sure it is not going to let us off on the fire floor.' Well, to make a long story short, he couldn't guarantee that. The only way to get there was to walk. We walked from the thirty-second floor to the roof and opened the roof, and of course the people reported being trapped weren't there, and now we had to get back down.

"I remember walking down. We had to stop on every floor, because we were totally exhausted. And I remember one of the senior guys — we were sweating profusely now, we were dirty and grimy, it must have been about eleven o'clock at night — and I remember him sitting on the stairs and looking over, and he said, 'You and your frickin' tape.'"

The FDNY has its headquarters in a building in the Metrotech complex, in downtown Brooklyn, and the deputy commissioner's office is on the eighth floor, next door to the commissioner's. A week after the attack, a new first deputy, Mike Regan, was already in place, and when I went to visit I could see that someone had dropped off a half-inch-thick departmental memo entitled "Missing as of September 17, 2001, 1400 hours." Otherwise, things in the office appeared to be pretty much as Feehan had left them. Arranged on the desk were half a dozen pictures of his grandchildren and a stack of his business cards, which he kept in a holder shaped like a fire hydrant. A collection of toy fire engines was

Illustration:
A horse-drawn steamer engine and the company of Engine 21. Horse-drawn engines were used into the second decade of the twentieth century. William Feehan's father worked in Engine 21 in 1929 when Feehan was born. Courtesy of New York City Fire Department, Mand Library.

displayed on the windowsills, and on the walls were fire-prevention posters drawn by New York City schoolchildren. Feehan's red appointment book was still lying near the phone.

In every municipal department, the commissioners are political appointees, while the people who work for them are civil servants. This distinction is keenly felt, and nowhere more so than among the members of the FDNY. At the headquarters, I picked up a copy of *Fire Works*, the department's internal newsletter. The issue, which had been published in July, included a Q & A with the commissioner. In answer to a question about mandatory training days, Von Essen had written, "When you look up hypocrisy in the dictionary, it should have UFA/UFOA written next to it." The UFA is the firemen's union; the UFOA is the officers' union.

Feehan's accomplishment, almost unheard of at the Fire Department, was to be equally popular with labor and management. "Very few people are loved by City Hall and the firefighters," Vincent Dunn, a retired FDNY senior deputy chief, told me. "Bill Feehan was to the fire commissioner what Colin Powell and Dick Cheney are to the president. He always made the top command look stable." This was not, by all accounts, because Feehan had an accommodating nature; as one of his friends put it, "He was a tough fucking guy." Feehan didn't care for whiners, and he was especially hard on shirkers. In firefighting, it is usually left to the junior man to carry the extinguisher, or "can." One of Feehan's favorite expressions was "If you're the can man, be the can man," and it meant "Just do your job."

Once, Feehan was sitting in a restaurant when he overheard a firefighter at another table boasting that he was fit enough to return to work but planned to squeeze a few extra days out of his medical leave. The next day, the man found himself, with no explanation, assigned to a desk just outside the commissioner's office. Only after he had spent a few days wondering anxiously what had happened did Feehan call him into his office to, as another Fire Department official put it to me, "read him the riot act." More recently, Feehan was involved in a minor traffic accident while driving to the funeral of a firefighter in Staten Island. When he arrived at the office the next day, he saw his name on the list of people



who were on medical leave. "More than one person got chewed out for that," John Feehan told me.

Feehan served briefly as the fire commissioner in the last days of David Dinkins's mayoralty. When Rudolph Giuliani was elected, he appointed Howard Safir to head the department, and asked Feehan to stay on as Safir's deputy. A few years later, Safir moved on to become the police commissioner. Feehan thought that he might be reappointed fire commissioner, and when Giuliani passed him over he confided his disappointment to Von Essen, the man who got the job. But, in keeping with his "be the can man" work ethic, Feehan put that disappointment aside and, Von Essen told me, "worked tirelessly to teach me and to mentor me."

During the more than four decades that Feehan served in the FDNY, the city's composition changed fundamentally, but the department's did not. *The Times* recently published two pages of pictures of the missing firefighters; there were barely a dozen African-American faces and not a single woman's. In the 1992 interview, Feehan acknowledged that critics were right to fault the department for its lack of diversity. "We have failed in that," he said. But he went on to say that he was pained by the way the critics had broadened their attack. "When they talk about a firehouse



Illustrations:
(top) A Seagrave aerial ladder truck used in Ladder Company 6 in the 1940s. Ladder 6 on Canal Street in Manhattan was the last fire company to which Feehan was appointed.
(below) Ladder 6 Seagrave wooden aerial truck in 1937. Both courtesy of New York City Fire Department, Mand Library.

culture, they talk about it negatively; and this disturbs me, because there is maybe not a



firehouse culture but a department culture," he said. "If you destroy the culture this department has, that tradition this department has, you destroy a very basic part of this department, and we just become another

city agency. I don't think that when you have a department whose men and women are expected to be ready at any moment to put their life on the line to go to the aid of a stranger, I don't think you can pay people to do that job. There has to be something beyond money that makes them do that, and I think it's the culture of the department."

"High-rise firefighting is a whole art in itself," Feehan once said. "I spent very little time in a high-rise area, and there are chiefs who know more about high-rise firefighting than I'll ever know. When you have your first high-rise fire, the thing that strikes you most is just how long it takes you to get the thing done. It is twenty or twenty-five minutes after you arrive at the scene before you are getting water out of the nozzle on the fire floor."

On the morning of September 11, Feehan was in his office, where he typically arrived by seven-fifteen. He was at his desk when his son John called with a question about the bibliography for the upcoming lieutenant's exam. Feehan told him that it would be available soon — it was just awaiting the commissioner's approval. A few minutes later, the first plane struck.

There was no precedent for the World Trade Center fire, and no way to fight it except as if there were. Feehan rushed from his office directly to the fire's command post, which, following standard protocol for a high-rise fire, had been set up in the lobby of the burning north tower. Every fire of any significance has such a post, which is basically nothing more than a metal folding table and a set of magnetic tabs labeled with the numbers of the FDNY companies. Whoever is in command draws

a rough sketch of the site directly onto the table with a felt-tip pen and then uses the magnetic markers to keep track of where the companies have been assigned. Also following standard protocol, the first companies to arrive at the World Trade Center were ordered to get hoses up to the blaze and to try to keep the stairwells open.

When a plane hit the south tower, the command post moved to West Street. Feehan's executive officer, Henry McDonald, was at home monitoring radio traffic. "The last thing I heard over the radio was that they were moving the post 'by orders of Chief Feehan,'" he told me.

Partly shielded by the north tower, the command post on West Street survived the collapse of the south tower, at 9:59 A.M., at which point Feehan and the chief of the department, Peter Ganci, decided to move the post farther north. But before they could do so, the north tower fell. (Von Essen had been called away to brief Mayor Giuliani, and this is why he survived.) Liz Feehan told me she was sure that her father would not have regarded his death as heroic. "We don't know exactly what happened to Dad," she said. "But he would have said, 'I'm not a hero — a wall fell on me. How does that make me a hero?' That's exactly what he would have said."

Feehan's body was one of the first to be pulled from the ruins; it was found that afternoon, while his son John and his son-in-law Brian Davan were nearby, assisting with the rescue operations. The funeral was held the following Saturday at St. Mel's, in Flushing. Among the mourners were Mayor Giuliani, Commissioner Von Essen, and the Speaker of the City Council, Peter Vallone. Ganci was buried on the same day, as was the Fire Department's chaplain, Mychal Judge.

William, Jr., delivered his father's eulogy. He spoke of Feehan's love for his family, his sense of humor, his profound optimism, and, above all, his pride in his work. He told about how, on the night after the attack, he had gone down to the site of the fire to see where his father had died and had found a certain comfort there — a comfort perhaps incomprehensible to someone who is not part of a fire family. Standing amid the wreckage, which at that point was still smoldering, he realized, he said, that "there was no place on earth my father enjoyed more than a fire scene."

*Illustration:
A fire scene in
New York City.
Courtesy of New
York City Fire
Department,
Mand Library.*