

Requiem for VHF

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So ends an era next week when the Raleigh Fire Department radio system switches from VHF to the 800 mhz VIPER system. The first two-way radios were installed in Raleigh fire apparatus in 1954, with base station radios operational in 1957. Radio watch was started at all stations on February 7, 1957. Someone sat at said radio from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m., with each shift (or watch period) lasting two hours. One year later, the Raleigh Fire Department began dispatching select county fire departments. (Has RFD always used VHF, all the way back to the 1950s?) Dispatching was done from Station 1, first from the watch room and later from the old alarm house behind Station 1. (See [this document](#) for that building's history.)

In the spring of 1972, both city and county fire dispatching moved to the new Emergency Communications Center on the first floor of the old Municipal Building and present Police Department. The ECC moved again in the next decade, to the basement of the new and current Municipal Building. "Headquarters" and "Central" are long-familiar terms to firefighters and scanner buffs alike, designating the dispatcher on Raleigh Fire or Wake County Fire, respectively. For most of the VHF era, the number of tactical channels was relatively few. RFD added repeaters and restructured its channels about five years ago, or so. Wake County added a sextet of tactical frequencies about the same time.

The formerly familiar "Code 1," "Code 2," and "Code 3" codes used by arriving RFD companies originated in the 1980s with Fire Chief Sherman Pickard. "Code 1" meant either no fire showing, or fire controllable with a booster line. "Code 2" meant fire showing, e.g. a working fire, and controllable with an 1 1/2-inch line. "Code 3" meant lots of fire showing, e.g. a major working fire, and requiring a 2 1/2-inch line or more. Alas, these codes were changed to the present plain-text terminology a year or more ago. You'll still hear county units use "Code 2, condition red" at times. Wake County fire departments switched to the 800 mhz VIPER system a year or so ago. Instead of a few tactical channels, us buffs were confronted with a couple dozen talkgroups. The days of easily following an incident on one of a handful of frequencies was passing.

The era finally ends next week, when RFD switches over and the VIPER talkgroups come even more alive with even more fire and EMS incidents. And while a couple inexpensive VHF scanners in your car, or at home, used to do the trick, this technology isn't as easy to tap. The new scanners are very expensive, and the sheer number of talkgroups means you really won't be able to listen to everything. But boy was it fun when we could, or we thought we could.

I've looked for an MP3 or WAV of "Taps" to post but cannot find one.

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