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Mess Dinner Procedures



A I R C O M M A N D

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MESS DINNER PROCEDURES

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FOREWORD

The Mess Dinner is one of the most important traditions of the Canadian Forces. With Unification, the various Mess Dinner customs of the previous services resulted in equally variable standards and considerable uncertainty among air element personnel about how a Mess Dinner should be conducted. A common standard will ensure that our rich heritage is preserved. This much-needed common approach was adopted and consolidated in this booklet. It also sets forth the policy, standard and format for Mess Dinners at Wings within Air Command.

Whereas these procedures have evolved primarily from the customs and traditions of former RCAF Officers' Messes, the format is readily adaptable for use by Senior Non-Commissioned Members' and Junior Ranks' Messes.

Chief of the Air Staff

February 2007

MESS DINNERS

1. **FUNCTION STATUS** - The Mess Dinner is a parade. Therefore, it is an official Canadian Forces' function at which dress, time of assembly, attendance, and other details shall be specified and have the legal standing of orders. Attendees shall be required to pay for the dinner. Guests are generally not expected to pay.
2. **OFFICIAL HOST** - The Official Host of the Mess Dinner shall normally be the Senior Officer/NCM of the organization sponsoring the dinner (eg, Base or Wing Commander, Base/Wing CWO), or his/her representative.
3. **GUEST OF HONOUR** - The Guest of Honour, if there is one, shall be escorted to the mess by the Official Host, or met at the entrance of the mess if circumstances make this more appropriate.
4. **PMC GREETING** - The PMC shall meet the Official Host and the senior guest, if applicable, in the foyer of the mess and shall escort them into the ante-room where he/she shall present them to the mess membership.

5. ASSEMBLY - The assembled personnel shall face the official host and the senior guest and remain attentive until the host has acknowledged their assembly by stating "Good evening, (ladies and) gentlemen", or by other appropriate remarks such as introducing the senior guest.
6. The assembled personnel may then proceed to cocktails, ensuring that all guests have been served first. Individual members may be assigned to act as escorts to other guests as a matter of courtesy.
7. All guests should be introduced by their escorts to as many of the other members present as feasible. All attendees, to the extent that numbers and time permit, should come forward and pay their respects to the Official Host and the senior guest.
8. Smoking is not permitted within the confines of the mess.
9. MESS CALL - A trumpeter or Piper, when available, shall make the appropriate calls to announce dinner. Following the second call, the PMC shall escort the Official Host to the head table (arranged as shown at

Annex B) or, if a Guest of Honour is present, the PMC shall escort him/her to the head table, followed by the Official Host, who shall escort the next senior guest. Other guests and their escorts should then follow, and the remainder shall parade into the dining room. The Vice-PMC shall ensure that all personnel move quickly into the dining room and shall take his/her position as soon as all personnel have entered the dining room. Once assembled personnel have taken their position behind their respective seats, the Chief Steward shall discreetly advise the Vice-PMC that everyone is present. At that point the PMC shall rap his/her gavel and ask the padre, or a previously designated member (quite often the most junior member present), to say grace. At the completion of grace, all shall be seated. If a Piper is present and has no further official duty for the evening, the Piper's Toast as outlined in paragraph six of Annex A can be done at this time.

10. CHIEF STEWARD - The Mess Manager or designated Chief Steward shall oversee the serving of dinner and wines and ensure that service in the dining-room is as quiet and unobtrusive as possible.
11. DINNER ETIQUETTE - The dinner proper is a time to appreciate the fellowship and conversation of

fellow personnel and guests, to savor good food and wine, and to enjoy relaxed formality in an elegant setting.

12. It is important that the unique atmosphere of the Mess Dinner not be disturbed or degraded in any way by immature or offensive behavior. If background music is to be played, it must be discrete so that it will not interrupt or override conversations. The PMC is to ensure that a high standard of decorum is maintained, if necessary by expelling any member whose behavior is unacceptable. No one may leave the dining room without first obtaining permission from the PMC.

13. ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES - In keeping with enlightened social attitudes, mess dinner attendees are perfectly free to decline the consumption of alcoholic beverages. It is entirely appropriate to drink toasts in water or fruit juice; these should be available on demand. For those who choose to consume wine, port or liqueurs, moderation is obligatory. Beverages of any types will not be brought into the dining room by attendees – at any time during the dinner, break, or speeches.

14. BREAK - On occasions where lengthy after-dinner formalities such as speeches and presentations

are scheduled, the PMC may decide that a short break is needed. Depending on several factors including but not limited to, number of servers, expected length of speeches, number of dinner attendees, etc., the PMC may choose to have the break before or after the passing of the port. Service may be delayed until all diners have returned to their chairs. Diners having to leave the dining room shall do so quietly and in an orderly manner. At the expiration of the break, the PMC shall rap his/her gavel for attention. Note for the break, the PMC shall announce the head table members will leave the dining room first.

15. PASSING THE PORT - After the last course has been served and the tables have been cleared or after the break, port decanters shall be placed on the tables. The Mess Manager or person acting as Chief Steward shall indicate to the PMC that the port is ready to be passed. At that point the stoppers shall be removed, and the PMC will indicate that the port may be passed by pouring a small amount of port into his/her glass, tasting it, and passing the decanter to the left. Port decanters shall be passed to the left, and the decanter shall not be placed on the table until it requires replenishment or has reached the end of the table. Once port has been poured into the glass, it shall

not be touched until it is time for the Loyal Toast. If a Piper is present, he/she will pipe in the port (see Annex A).

16. **LOYAL TOAST** - When the Mess Manager, or person acting as Chief Steward, has indicated to the PMC that all have been served port, the PMC shall rap his/her gavel for attention, all conversation shall cease, the PMC shall rise, and shall announce to the Vice-PMC, either, "Mr. Vice, The Queen of Canada", or "Monsieur le vice président, La Reine du Canada". The Vice-PMC will then rise and announce in the other official language, "(ladies and) gentlemen, The Queen of Canada" or, "(Mesdames et) messieurs, La Reine du Canada", as appropriate. At that point all personnel and guests shall rise and shall remain standing at attention until all bars of "God Save The Queen" have been played (if a band is present) then the assembly shall pick up their glass of port and hold it at waist level announcing individually, in French or English, "The Queen"/"La Reine", and take the Loyal Toast. Glasses shall be lowered to the table, and the assembly shall be seated.

17. **OTHER TOASTS** - When foreign head table guests are present, it is appropriate to toast the head of state of each such foreign guest. When foreign

guests are present from countries belonging to the British Commonwealth, the Loyal Toast to the Queen will suffice.

18. When a number of non-commonwealth nations are represented, a collective toast is appropriate, eg, "(ladies and) gentlemen, the heads of state of those nations here represented". In this case, the National Anthem of all the countries in the collective toast will not be played. A member of a foreign force who is undergoing training with the CF, or filling a vacancy in the CF establishment, should not be considered an official representative of his/her country at a Mess Dinner unless he/she has been so delegated.

19. For Marches – When you hear the March that represents your Command and or Branch, each assembled guest shall stand to attention, and once the march has been played shall pick up their glass and take the salute. It is also permitted that if you have served with a branch to stand up and participate in the toast.

20. ABSENT FRIENDS, FALLEN COMRADES - Depending on the reason for the Mess Dinner, the PMC may find it appropriate to include a reference

to absent friends and fallen comrades. This could take various forms including a toast, or a moment's silence, or a small ceremony in front of a place setting with an empty chair, etc.

21. INTRODUCTION BY PMC - At the beginning of the dinner the PMC shall introduce the head table. After the last toast, coffee and/or liqueurs and or cheese tray may be served. If the Piper was not toasted earlier, this is the correct time to do so. It is also customary for the PMC and/or the host to recognize the serving staff and drink a toast with the Chief Cook. This is the most appropriate time for this toast, as there is no more serving to take place. This toast will precede the speeches. The PMC should also recognize the Band, if in attendance, at this time. The PMC will then make any announcements appropriate to the occasion, and introduce the Official Host if the latter wishes to speak. The Official host will introduce the Guest of Honour. The PMC, Official Host and Guest of Honour are not to be interrupted during their remarks.

22. DEPARTING THE DINING ROOM - When all speeches have been concluded and the Official Host has indicated to the PMC that it is time to depart the dining room, all in attendance shall rise

and remain standing until the Official Host, Senior Guest, PMC, and head table guests have moved from the dining room.

23. **AFTER DINNER ENTERTAINMENT** - After adjournment to the anteroom, the formal aspects of the Mess Dinner are considered to have been concluded. The Official Host and guests may engage in conversation or such games and skits as may be appropriate to the mess and the occasion. This informal aspect of the mess dinner should counter-balance the preceding formality. There is considerable scope for enjoyment within the broad parameters of avoiding obscenities, insults, destructive activities, or gambling. Good humour and camaraderie should be the theme in arranging post-dinner activities. Some personnel and guests will wish to continue with conversation; one of the benefits of a mess dinner is that it should provide the time and setting for frank, open discussion, particularly between senior and junior personnel. Again, while senior personnel should permit latitude and encouragement for this kind of communication, rudeness and deliberate offensiveness will not be tolerated.

24. **TRADITION** - Mess Dinners are special events in our way of life; to ensure that we conduct them

with dignity and enjoyment is a solemn, collective responsibility.

25. MIXED DINING-IN - The organizer of a Mixed Dining-In should keep in mind that spouses are not military personnel, and should not be expected to know the various rules of a mess dinner. Therefore, the above guidelines can be used for Mixed Dining-In evenings; however, they may be adapted and relaxed to cater to the situation.

ANNEX A

THE PIPER AT A MESS DINNER

1. When a Piper has been arranged for a Mess Dinner, the procedures set forth herein should be followed.
2. The Mess Manager should ensure that a room is allocated for the Piper to use as a tuning/dressing room. This room should be located far enough from the guests so that the Piper will not be heard whilst tuning his/her bagpipe, yet near enough for easy communication with regard to cues, timings or changes. In setting up the dining room, a clear aisle/passage must be left around the perimeter to permit the Piper to march freely whilst playing.

ROUTINE

3. ALERT - Fifteen minutes prior to the scheduled time for dinner, the Piper should position himself/herself at a predetermined spot and, at the halt, play a short tune as a "warning for dinner". A five-minute warning may also be played. When finished playing, he/she should move to his/her position ready to play the march-in to dinner.

4. MARCH-IN - On a cue from the Mess Manager or Chief Steward, the Piper leads the procession into the dining room playing an appropriate tune, and marches counter-clockwise around the perimeter so that his/her drones will not collide with or be caught up on anything. On completion of one circuit of the room, the Piper should continue playing, at the halt, in a suitable location near the doorway until given a cue by the Mess Manager to cease playing (this being when all diners have entered the room). The Piper should remain at attention until grace has been said, then lay down his/her bagpipes and await an invitation from the PMC to be toasted (see paragraph six, below).

5. THE PORT - The Piper should be given a 15-minute warning by the Mess Manager prior to playing in the port in order that he/she may prepare. On cue from the Mess Manager, the Piper leads the wine stewards into the dining room, playing an appropriate tune, and positions himself/herself at a predetermined spot. He/she then continues to play selections of his/her own choosing until given a cue by the Mess Manager to cease playing. Normally this would be when all of the port has been poured. The Piper then remains at attention until after the Toast to The Queen when he/she quietly leaves the room.

6. PIPER'S TOAST - This is traditional, and is given in Gaelic. If it is to take place following the march-in and the saying of grace, the PMC will invite the Piper to approach the head table to be toasted by the Official Host. The Piper marches to the head table and halts before the Official Host, salutes, and the Official Host rises to greet him/her. The Mess Manager proffers a tray upon which are two Quaichs (special silver cups), or glasses, each containing straight scotch whiskey. The Official Host gives one of these to the Piper and keeps the other. It is customary for the PMC to request silence from the diners at this point by rapping the gavel. The Piper then raises his/her Quaich and says:

“Slàinte” (pronounced Slawn-cha')
meaning “Good Health”.

to which the Official Host replies :

“Slàinte Mhath” (pronounced Slawn-cha Vah')
meaning “Good Health to You”.

They both then drain the contents of their Quaich in one drink and the Quaichs are returned to the tray. The Piper salutes the Official Host again, executes an about-turn, and marches out of the dining room, recovering his/her bagpipes.

NOTES

1. The Piper's Toast is considered his/her dismissal for the evening.
2. The Quaich may be filled with a non-alcoholic beverage upon request.

FEE

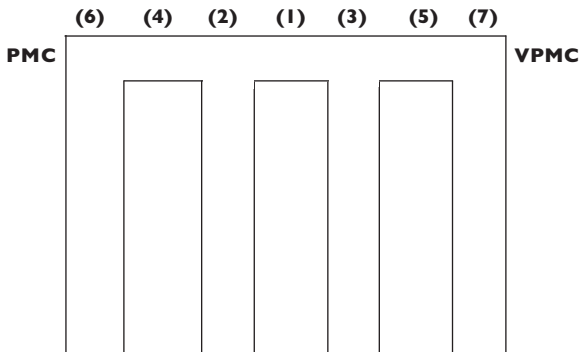
7. If it has been decided to pay the Piper, appropriate arrangements should be finalized prior to the dinner. In this way, the Mess Manager can deal with the payment of the predetermined fee at the conclusion of the Piper's duties.

SUMMARY

8. It is not mandatory to schedule all of the Routine, however, if the full procedure is used, the above sequence should be adhered to.
9. Once the organizers of the dinner have decided upon the total requirement for the Piper, they should ensure that all concerned are made aware of their decision, i.e., the Mess Manager, the Piper, and the PMC.

ANNEX B

TABLE ARRANGEMENTS



- (1) Official Host
- (2) 1st Guest
- (3) 2nd Guest
- (4) & (5) etc. as assigned by the Official Host and PMC

NOTE: The seating of the head table shall be positioned in such a way that conversation can be easily engaged between members of the table of honour and adjoining guest in front of them.

NOTES

1. The Official Host shall sit at the centre of the head table, and the guests as per the drawing.

2. Official Host
Officers' Mess - the Senior Officer of the organization sponsoring the dinner

Official Host
Senior NCOs' Mess - the Wing Chief Warrant Officer

Official Host
Junior Ranks' Mess - the Honourary PMC

Official Host
Squadron/Unit - Sqn/Unit CO

3. For the remainder of attendees a liberal mixing of personnel is to be encouraged. This will meet the intent and spirit of Mess Dinners

