

Saddles and Sabers: Conduct of the Mess: Role of Tradition in Unit Social Gatherings

by MAJ Wilford L. Garvin

Well-executed social functions bolster a unit's ability to develop a culture of mutual trust and better employ the philosophy of mission command. Enjoyed shared experiences allow leaders to increase mutual understanding, grow the bonds of fellowship characteristic of the profession of arms, and generally contribute to morale and pride in the organization. Many units execute "stable calls," post-gunnery "dens," spur dinners, military balls, dining-ins and other activities to foster this climate.

Armor and Cavalry units, often reputed for their panache, regularly display their organization's unique culture and pride through these events. The tradition of an "organizational mess" provides a method for teams to further a sense of history and *esprit de corps* by linking such activities within a historical framework.

Many leaders have already experienced some of the traditions of a mess through the conduct of dining-ins. Those who have attended a dining-in will probably recall the wear of mess-dress uniforms, complicated and archaic rules too numerous to remember, lively banter and accusations and the humorous governing of the event by a gavel-armed officer addressed as "Mr. Vice." Many units within the U.S. military already employ these traditions of a mess. However, the traditions of governing military social functions with gavels, archaic tradition and procedures akin to "Robert's Rules of Order" can extend beyond the dining-in.

World War I experience

During World War I, U.S. leaders gained increased exposure to the concept of a mess serving as more than just a location for food service. Leaders in the American Expeditionary Force socialized with their French and British allies and returned to the United States with a richer understanding of mess traditions.

In a social context, a mess is the body of leaders assigned to, or still affiliated with, a unit which periodically gathers in the spirit of social fraternity. This body, historically associated with regiments, complies with rules, regulations and traditions passed on from preceding generations.

In the absence of a standing regimental headquarters, a regimental mess may consist of chapters from each active battalion or squadron. A mess preferably meets in a dedicated mess hall, a standing structure within the regiment or battalion/squadron footprint.

When assembled, members of the mess conduct themselves in accordance with the organization's "rules of the mess." This document encourages good cheer and enjoyment of the fellowship and shared experiences of the organization. While encouraging banter and good-natured snark, it does not permit gossip, derision or ridicule. A mess is a social organization in parallel of the military unit. As such, members of a mess conduct themselves in a relaxed manner, though remain mindful that the etiquette shared in the mess does not extend back into their military duties.



Figure 1. SSG David Batt, assigned to 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division, Fort Hood, TX, attends the 1st Cavalry Division Association’s Stetson Stable Call with his wife Candice and son Parker at the 1st Cavalry Division Museum. (U.S. Army photo)

When a mess meets, members selected to hold specific offices govern its proceedings. These officers ceremonially open and close of the gatherings of the mess, govern the execution of the traditions and ceremonies associated with the gathering and maintain the decorum of the members. Organizations may appoint the officers of the mess based on both military duty position and the personality and panache of the individual members.

While these offices may differ in number and duties across organizations, a well-governed mess will invariably include a president and vice president at a minimum.

The president of the mess will always be the organization’s commander. This is the only position in which the mess demands a specific military position because the commander is responsible for everything the unit, including its mess, does or fails to do. The duties of the president of the mess may include:

- Directing the call to assemble;
- Ensuring the good governance of the mess when assembled;
- Ensuring the mess honors the traditions of the organization; and
- Ensuring the well-being of the members assembled.

The president of the mess appoints the vice president to lead the cheerful activities of the mess as a kind of master of ceremonies. Informally addressed as “Mr./Ms. Vice,” the vice president may often also be the organization’s second-in-command. However, the president may also appoint a *pro tem*, “for a time,” vice president based on the character of the business at a particular gathering of the mess. A common example of this includes selecting a *pro tem* Mr. Vice for a dining-in based on brashness of personality and quickness of wit. The vice president’s duties may include assisting the president in the traditional opening and closing of the mess; governing conduct of its members; and guiding the mess in conduct of its agenda, traditions and ceremonies.



Figure 2. LTC William Rachal of Breaux Bridge, LA, commander of the Louisiana National Guard's 2nd Squadron, 108th Cavalry Regiment, headquartered in Shreveport, LA, addresses his troopers during a Stable Call on Contingency Operating Base Adder in Iraq as squadron mascot Geronimo looks on. At the time the squadron was deployed with 256th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 13th Sustainment Command (Expeditionary), in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom to assist in setting the conditions for the responsible drawdown of U.S. troops and equipment in Iraq. (Photo by 1LT Angela Fry, 256th Brigade Combat Team, Louisiana Army National Guard)

Research unit traditions

Should an organization wish to expand the traditions of its social functions to include the mess beyond “dining-ins,” it should first research existing history and tradition within the organization. Rules of the mess and other traditions often already exist but were lost as guidons transferred, inactivated or reactivated.

Next, organizations should consider current practices and encourage many members to help capture the organization’s emerging traditions. Not all leaders find immediate interest in adding ceremony to social activity, and the opportunity to participate helps foster ownership.

A newly forming, or reforming, mess may begin by adhering to the following practices:

- **Defining membership based on level of organization.** Typically, this will be at platoon leader/platoon sergeant and above at battalion/squadron level, and company/troop commander/first sergeant and above at brigade or regiment level.
- **Selecting a suitable location for the mess to meet.** In absence of an established mess hall, some may use existing “regimental rooms” that contain historical artifacts and displays of the organization, or they may select off-site locations.
- **Assigning roles and responsibilities.** The president should select officers (especially *pro tem* officers) based on personality rather than only military rank and position. Other offices in a mess may include a master at arms, sergeant at arms, wardens, a chaplain and a secretary charged with keeping an account of the event fit for recording.
- **Creating an agenda and means to govern proceedings.** A typical agenda should include simple opening and closing ceremonies; recognition of new, visiting or departing members; and traditional activities such as “broken saber/sprocket” awards during a “stable call.”
- **Determining and publishing rules of the mess.** Pretentious and archaic observances such as gavels, points of order and investigations into violations of the rules of the mess can add to the levity of an event. Also, rules that define offenses against the mess may serve as a lighthearted way for organizations to correct tactical behavior by “levying fines” for poor radio etiquette, getting vehicle stuck, etc.

Of note, military messes, though fraternal in nature, are not college fraternities. Meetings of the mess should not go so far in the name of fellowship as to endanger good order and discipline. The social structure of the mess does not cancel the chain of command. Good-natured camaraderie must not devolve into excesses of familiarity and fraternization.

Likewise, good-natured ribbing must remain such: free of mean-spirited attack that threatens mutual trust and respect between leaders. Finally, as few organizations find their members billeted in proximity to an established mess hall, a well-governed mess sees to the safety of its members.

All members of a mess must resume their duties when next directed in the same good standing they held before. Good governing by the officers of the mess, in accordance with its rules, provides a system to maintain the organization's reputation while fostering a positive spirit.

No 'mandatory fun'

Leaders should also ensure that meetings of the mess not take on a characteristic of "mandatory fun." While enjoyment of social gatherings depends on some items beyond the control of the mess, such as individual preferences and personalities, the mess can take steps to encourage a positive climate.

When possible, the mess should meet before the close of a convenient duty day to avoid taking time from family or personal matters. The president should call meetings predictably, either by time (monthly) or by following major training events.

The vice president should communicate the agenda for the meeting to allow members to prepare; well-rehearsed skits, storytelling and such increase the good humor of meetings and increase involvement of members.

Finally, commanders should only sparingly designate a meeting of the mess as a "place of duty." Instead, commanders should foster a climate where leaders *want* to attend events rather than *need* to do so.

As we move further into 2021, units may now find themselves looking to again gather beyond the mission-essential to foster fellowship. The traditions of a well-governed mess provide a way to add further meaning and memory to these events. Though some organizations within the U.S. Army do not hold the unbroken lineage or association with historical meeting halls, leaders may still institute the symbolism and tradition of a mess system within their organizations. When properly executed, a mess can provide its members a means of continuing unit traditions, a healthy climate of camaraderie, trust, team-building and happy memories of the time spent together. Units with such pride and confidence invariably carry this spirit with them in execution of their missions. This furthers the legacy of the profession of arms as leaders continue their journeys throughout the Army and beyond.

MAJ Wilford Garvin currently serves as a movement and maneuver observer/coach/trainer with the Mission Command Training Program at Fort Leavenworth, KS. He most recently served as the executive officer for 1st Battalion, 9th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT) "Black Jack," 1st Cavalry Division, Fort Hood, TX. His other assignments include operations officer, 1-9 Cavalry, 2nd ABCT, 1st Cavalry Division; CJ5 future planner, Headquarters Resolute Support/U.S. Forces Afghanistan, Camp Resolute Support, Kabul, Afghanistan; team chief, Maneuver Captain's Career Course (MCCC), Maneuver Center of Excellence, Fort Benning, GA; and small-group leader, MCCC, Fort Benning. MAJ Garvin's military schools include the Armor Officer Basic Course; MCCC; Air Command and Staff College; and the Advanced Military Studies Program, Army School of Advanced Military Studies. MAJ Garvin holds a bachelor's of arts degree in history from Stephen F. Austin State University and masters' of military art and science degrees from Air University's Air Command and Staff College and the Army School of Advanced Military Studies' Advanced Military Studies Program. MAJ Garvin's awards include the Bronze Star Medal, 1st oak-leaf cluster; Defense Meritorious Service Medal; Meritorious Service Medal, 2nd oak-leaf cluster; and the Combat Action Badge. He is a former vice president of the 1st Chapter of the 9th U.S. Cavalry Regimental Mess.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ABCT – armored brigade combat team

MCCC – Maneuver Captain's Career Course