

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
Headquarters, 97th Engineer Battalion
138th Engineer Group (Construction)
Fort Riley, Kansas 66442

ALREN-YO

9 January 1969

SUBJECT: 97th Engineer Battalion Formal Messⁱ

1LT Scrimpsher

Dear Sir:

You are cordially invited to attend the 97th Engineer Battalion's 6th Formal Mess. It is to be held in the Gold Room of the Fort Riley Officers Open Mess during the evening of 23 January 1969.

It will commence at 1800 hours with a receiving line and cocktail hour with cash bar. Uniform will be Dress Blues with bow tie, without nametags. The evening will cost approximately \$6.00. Crud will be played immediately following dinner.

Sincerely,

2 Incl
1. The Formal Mess
2. The Rules of Crud
RSVP BE 9-7115

s/Robert A Christensen
ROBERT A CHRISTENSEN
2LT, CE
Mr. Vice

THE
FORMAL
MESS

US ARMY TRADITIONS

In the United States Army of today, the Formal Mess tradition has practically become extinct. Formal dining has largely fallen victim to the many social changes occurring within our society, which are reflected in our huge and sometimes impersonal Army.

Rapid turnover of men, which is standard in today's Army, has made it difficult for officers to become attached to the traditions of a unit. In fact, units themselves organize and reorganize so rapidly that many can no longer readily determine "whose traditions are whose." "Regimental" silver has gone into a decline generally, they're being often no longer a setting in which to use it.

Another setback, strangely enough, comes from the ladies, God bless them, who have descended on the Officers Open Mess – once the "Officer's Club" and a bastion of the male officer. The officers' wives have now, in many cases, commandeered this historically masculine outpost, have converted it to the home of the ladies bridge club and have installed decorations and trappings to carry out this theme. The Officer Mess in its heyday was a man's world, but times have definitely changed.

In the "old days" (prior to World War 1), the Officers Mess flourished, particularly at the turn of the twentieth century. Small posts across the country developed rigid rules of formal dining. The meal was opened by the arrival of the senior officer. Everyone present wore Dress Blues, or in the summer, Whites. During the 1920's and 30's no officer would have thought of entering the Army-Navy Club in Manila in the evening unless he wore mess jacket or Whites. If an officer appeared late, a formal apology was expected of him before he took his seat. In those days the formal military dinner was strictly a man's world. If women were present it was only in an emergency, and even then were accommodated in a side room.

Since the United States has always been a vast land of diverging customs and sociological paradoxes, no formal Dining-In rules were universally adopted—unlike the situation in the British military. In the eastern U.S. formal dinners were in vogue among the more social regular and militia organizations, such as those stationed around Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington.

Things were different in the "wild west" however. Formal dining was not as stylish among officers in isolated outposts deep in Indian Territory, who often were more disconsolate about their isolation and lack of promotions than proud of their traditions. Dining-In also seemed incongruous in a primitive land of buffalo and scalp hunters.

Whatever units had formal dinner prior to the custom's general decline after World War 1 probably practiced rules of etiquette very much like those of European regiments. Since then, as

now, good manners and basic etiquette are fairly international. One of the authoritative Army publications which gave a substantial space to proper conduct of the “Regimental Mess” is the 1917 edition of the “Officers Manual” by LTC James A Moss.

Recognizing the lack of any uniform officers’ formal dining procedures in the United States, the manual lists mainly European rules shifted from a consensus of various American Officers who attended Regimental Mess at home and overseas.

According to those officers, the Regimental Mess was a place of strict formalities which were adhered to in general. The presiding senior officers, of course sat at the head of the table. The next ranking officer sat on his right and the adjutant on his left. Remaining officers were seated on either side of the table according to rank. Usually the caterer sat at the end of the table opposite the presiding officer.

No officer took his seat until the presiding officer arrived. If the senior officer knew he would arrive late he would inform the other officers to proceed without him. Should he then appear during the meal all would rise until he was seated.

Regimental dinners were broken into two parts, the formal dinner and the informal after-dinner smoker. Division of those two phases was termed “removing the cloth.” The “cloth” was officially “removed” when the senior officer received his cup of coffee. No officer could leave the table before this change over without excusing himself to the presiding officer. At very important dinner functions an officer could not leave until the presiding officer “set the example.”

Most official Army publications have historically tended to shy away from this lighter side of military life. Officers have been left in the dark regarding simple procedure of formal dinners held in a “regimental” setting.

PURPOSE OF THE CUSTOM

The Formal Mess is conducted in order that “standards and ideas of the Army are passed on from older to younger officers.” As such it is a dramatic illustration that the Army is not just a job, but is a profession and a way of life.

This Mess is a vehicle for causing intermingling of officers who frequently never come into contact with each other during normal social functions or in the course of business. As Shakespeare stated, “Strive mightily but eat and drink as friends.”

Inline with its stated purpose, the Mess is a training ground for all officers who in later assignments and jobs, both military and civilian, will be required to participate in functions calling for a high degree of formality. Hence, all personnel will gain experience in standards of conduct required during such formal activity.

SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

1. **GENERAL:** A program has been established, which is summarized in the following paragraphs. If further details are required, each member is encouraged to contact one of the appointed officers. The program is as follows:

- a. Assembly
- b. Call to dinner
- c. Dinner
- d. Passing of Decanters
- e. Toasts
- f. Speaker

2. **DISCUSSION OF PROGRAM:**

a. **Assembly:** This is a sixty (60) minute period on which members and guests exchange social greetings. Cocktails will be served. All personnel are expected to be prompt in arriving at the time specified for the start of the assembly. Upon arrival the officer should announce himself to the President by coming to attention and stating "Good Evening, Sir." During the remainder of the assembly, members are encouraged to seek out new officers, make appropriate introductions, and do everything possible to make new officers feel at home.

b. **The Call to Dinner:**

(1) General: The call to dinner denotes the termination of the period of assembly and the commencement of the Formal Mess. Smoking will cease upon call to dinner.

(2) Responsibilities:

1st Vice: Is responsible to determine the following:

1. The seating arrangement to determine the following:
2. The meal is in fact ready to serve.
3. The wine is poured just prior to his announcement that dinner is ready.
4. Notifies the President of the above facts as accomplished.
5. Control the movement to the dining area so that the President and the

honored guests precede the remainder of the assembly.

(3) President:

1. Locates and instructs the honored guest that dinner is ready to be served.

2. Escorts the honored guest to his place in the dining area, after the guest has finished his drink.

3. Instructs the 1st Vice to make a general announcement that dinner is ready.

c. Dinner: The movement to the dining area is conducted in a most gentlemanly manner. Jostling of seniors to gain a positional advantage is undignified if not disgraceful, display of manners. Members should discreetly check seating arrangements prior to call to dinner.

Upon arriving at the designated place, members will remain standing for the Grace. In the absence of an assigned chaplain, Mr Vice will say Grace. After the seating of honored guests, the assembly gain their seats.

During the conduct of the formal dinner, members will take the lead from the head table. Members are reminded that the waiters will remove dishes as the head table finishes hence, each officer must pace himself according to the actions of the President.

d. Passing of Decanters: After the dinner table has been cleared of dishes with the exception of wine and water glasses, the ritual of Passing Decanters can commence. The President will perform the honors for the honored and then for himself. As soon as the President has filled his own glass the assembly will fill their own glasses. When all glasses have been filled, the President can precede with the TOASTS.

(1) General: A toast is an honor to which a distinguished assembly, as this corps of officers off the United States Army, raise their glasses and drink to a person, an institution, and/or a sentiment. For those individuals who do not imbibe, it is acceptable to toast by dinking water.

(2) Order: The order of the Toast will be first, in honor of the President of the United States, second, in honor of our leadership and others follow as appropriate.

(3) Procedure: The following procedures are to be utilized as illustrated in the following examples:

Example 1: President: "I wish to propose a toast to the President of the United States."
The assembly: "To the President"
(All then raise their glasses and drink).

Example 2: Mr Vice: "I wish to propose a toast to our leadership."
(All then raise their glasses and drink, with the exception of the Battalion Commander).

Example 3: 1st Vice: "I wish to propose a toast to the Chief of Engineers."
(All raise their glasses and drink).

For the purpose of brevity and sincerity, it has been dictated to limit the number of toasts to five (5). Personnel to propose toasts will be designated prior to the Formal Mess.

f. Speakers and Honored Guests: These gentlemen will be selected from a list of entertaining and distinguished personnel available from all sources. Prior to presentation of the Honored Guests, the President will call upon selected numbers for dissertations concerning appropriate customs and traditions of the service. At this time upon signal from the President, smoking will be permitted.

3. UNIFORM:

General: A formal occasion of this nature requires the most formal of attire. For the Officer of the United States Army, there are many appropriate uniforms. In order to minimize the financial burden, one uniform will be worn, the Army Dress Blue.

Wear: With the above uniform the following accessories will be worn:

1. Bow tie
2. All authorized medals. Ribbons may be worn in lieu of medals.
3. White gloves will be worn.
4. Uniform cap will be worn.
5. Name tag will not be worn.

CRUD RULES

Object: To eliminate all other players. Players are eliminated by losing 3 lives.

Equipment: Pool Table
Cue Ball
Red Ball

Loss of Life:

1. When the red ball is knocked into any pocket, the player who preceded the shooter loses a life.
2. When the red ball is spotted and the shooter fails to hit it on 3 consecutive shots, he loses a life.
3. When the red ball fails to move more than 6 inches after being hit by the cue ball, the shooter loses a life.
4. When the red ball is in motion and is not hit by the cue ball before it comes to rest, the shooter loses a life.
5. A player loses a life when he fails to have at least one foot on the ground while shooting.

6. A player loses a life when he shoots from an illegal position.

7. Whenever the red ball or cue ball are knocked off the table the shooter causing this action loses a life.

Play:

Play begins by having the red ball spotted on the table. First player then shoots the cue ball at the red ball from opposite end of the table. When the red ball is spotted the shooter has only 3 chances to hit it. While on any other turn the number of shots are not limited. Should the red ball be pocketed from the spotted position it is respotted and counts as 1 shot against the shooter. After the first player strikes the ball the next player must recover the cue ball and attempt to knock the red ball into a pocket. Failure to strike the red ball before it comes to rest results in a loss of life. The red ball is then respotted and the following player begins play again. Should the shooter knock the red ball into any pocket while the red ball is in motion the preceding player loses a life and the following player begins play again. Shooter must shoot from behind of the short end of the table.

s/Cecil E Hutchinson
CECIL E HUTCHINSON
CPT, CE
Mr Vice

ⁱ Transcribed and prepared by MAJ (Ret.) Larry L. Castleman for the history files, 97th EBC, from original documents provided by John Ray Scrimpsheer, Pirmasens, Germany; Ft. Riley, Kansas; Platoon/Company Commander, C-97th Engr, 1967-1969.