# Purpose

A Mess Dinner is one of the most coveted and important traditions of the Canadian Forces. It is a time to appreciate the comradeship and company of fellow service members and guests and to savour fine cuisine in an elegant setting.

Tradition remains to this day one of the prime ingredients in air cadet *esprit de-corps*.

Mess dinners originated about 200 years ago, the purpose being the same then as it is now: to afford the opportunity for seniors and juniors to meet on a friendly but formal occasion; and, to enable the Commanding Officer to speak to his squadron as a group. The traditional formality of the dinner fosters a fellowship which would be lacking at less formal functions.

Some units, bases, ships or the services of other nations have highly individualized customs and traditions quite different from those of your own mess. When entertaining guests, a prior brief explanation of your own idiosyncrasies is a courtesy that is normally greatly appreciated and reduces the potential for embarrassment.

Historically, the mess dinner was the time, after working hours, when members sat down for dinner with their CO. It was the custom of the day when every officer lived in the mess and officers were required to dress for dinner. The mess dinner was a result of the rules of gentlemanly conduct. The present-day mess dinner evolved from the customs and traditions of former Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) officers' messes and can be adapted for use by senior non-commissioned members (NCM) and junior members.

A mess dinner is considered a parade requiring all unit members to attend. Dress, time of assembly and other details are specified. To enjoy the formality of the setting, immature or offensive behaviour is not tolerated. The PMC of the Mess Committee (PMC) ensures that a high standard of decorum is maintained.

PMC

The PMC of the Mess (PMC) is appointed by the Commanding Officer (CO) and is typically the Squadron Cadet Commander. He/She is responsible for maintaining good order, conduct, formality, discipline, timings, and fluidity in the mess. The PMC is in absolute charge of the mess regardless of rank, branch or seniority. He/She may levy fines or take any other action he/she deems necessary to maintain discipline. No person in the mess may be seated, begin eating, or toast prior to the PMC.

Vice-PMC

The PMC assigns a Vice-PMC (V/PMC). This member is typically the most junior member attending the dinner. The V/PMC is responsible for: ensuring that unauthorized changes are not made to the seating plan; checking the mess after members and guests move into the dining room; indicating to the PMC that all diners are present, responding to the loyal toast; and supervising the dining room after those at the head table have departed.

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. The CO will sit at the head table in a prominent position close to the PMC. Proper respect and dignity shall always be shown to the CO, regardless of the role s/he assumes for the evening.

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.

# Honorary CO

It is customary for the youngest member of the squadron to be bestowed the position of CO for the evening. (Applicable more towards Christmas Mess Dinners).

# The Gavel

The PMC and Vice-PMCs shall have gavels to conduct business. The member shall rap their base to gain the attention of the mess.

# Order of the Mess

**When the CO and/or the senior guest arrive:** all members shall rise as a form of courtesy.

Tradition dictates that diners do not leave the table without prior permission from the PMC, thus, diners often visit the washrooms during the pre-dinner calls.

**When the Honoured Guest and Head Table arrives:** PMC shall escort the Honoured Guest to the head table followed by the CO who shall escort the next senior guest. Other guests and their hosts should then follow and the remaining cadets shall proceed to the dining room.

The V/PMC shall take his position as soon as all cadets have entered the dining room and have taken their places.

Each member and guest shall stand behind his chair until grace has been said by a chaplain or a previously designated cadet.

**Commencement:** Once everyone has taken their place the VPMC advises the PMC that everyone is present - “Mr. PMC, all diners are present”

**The PMC taps the table for silence.**

Members and guests should stand behind their chairs until the PMC calls upon a chaplain or a designated member to say grace.

**Grace:** “Padre or (Name), would you offer the blessing” A simple blessing is given such as “For what we are about to receive, thank God”, diners will reply Amen”.

**Diners seat themselves:** Only by pulling their chairs to the right and moving to the left side of the chair to sit.

# After Dinner

The Commanding Officer will have previously selected senior cadets or members of the Regiment/Guests to offer toasts.

**When the table is cleared:** The senior steward reports to the PMC, “Table cleared, Sir/Madam/Ma’am”. The PMC taps the table for silence and grace is said as before; the customary prayer being: “For what we have received, thank God”.

# Toasts

**Passing the Port**

The Air Force tradition includes the port being piped in by a piper. The port decanter never touches the table, symbolizing the flying aspect of the Air Force.

The senior steward reports to the PMC: “The port is ready to be passed, Sir/Ma’am.” The PMC removes the stopper, pours a partial glass, samples it as one would wine before serving it, and passes the decanter to the left.

If a lady is sitting on the left it is customary to ask the lady if you may pour for her. This must only be done after you have filled your own glass.

The last persons to receive the Port are the PMC and V/PMCs. After they pour their Port, stoppers are placed back onto the decanters.

When the decanters have been passed to all diners, the senior steward reports to the PMC: “The port has been passed, Sir/Ma’am.”

No one may touch his/her port until the Loyal Toast has been proposed.

# The Loyal Toast

After the port has been passed, the PMC raps for silence, rises and, addressing the V/PMC, says, *“Mr/Madam Vice, the Queen of Canada”.* The V/PMC then rises and, addressing the diners, says *“Ladies and Gentlemen, The Queen”.*

# Other Toasts

If an official representative from a foreign state is present, a toast should be made to the head of state. When more than one country is represented, the national anthems are generally played in alphabetical order. Where there are a large number of official foreign guests, it is acceptable to *toast “The Heads of State here represented.”*

# Playing of March Pasts

It is customary for all diners to be identified by a march pasts.

The RCAF March Past - “Air Force”

La\_Feuille\_d'Erable “CIC”

When the diner hears their march past, they shall stand and remain standing until the completion of the music. Diners stand for past or present service march past, or usually the one identified by the uniform they are wearing.

# Fallen Comrades Toast

This may take the form of a simple toast "To Fallen Comrades" requested by the PMC or one of the members present.

Alternatively, some Messes set a separate table place setting in honor of the fallen, and when desired, an explanatory description of the place setting and a longer version of a Toast may be presented. (See Annex B)

# Following the Toasts

The PMC and/or the host to recognize the serving staff and drink a toast with the Chief Cook.

The PMC will then make any announcements appropriate to the occasion, and introduce the Official Host (CO).

The Official host will introduce the Guest of Honor and ask him to say a few words. Once this is complete, the CO shall be free to present any other awards, promotions. The PMC, Official Host and Guest of Honor are not to be interrupted during their remarks.

# Additional Toasts

After the two toasts have been made the PMC may open up the floor for the diners to make toasts. Toasts should be meaningful, honest, and relevant to the function of the mess.

# Dismissal

The senior member indicates dinner is officially over by standing until noticed by all diners. It is customary for other members to stand until all guests at the head table have left the room. The PMC accompanies official guests to the lounge while the V/PMC remains until all guests have left the dining room.

# Seating

The CO sits at the centre of the head table, with the senior guest on his right. Other guests and senior members sit to the right and left of the CO and senior guest.

The PMC sits at the right end of the head table, and the V/PMC at the left end.

The guests of the head table lead the procession and stand behind their chair. Before each place setting at the Mess table will be a small card displaying the diner’s name. This is provided as an aide to finding one's seat.

Cards are very simple, of white card stock with typewritten names. Place cards have another role. They are often used to pass a note down the table, usually intended for the PMC, though any note passed along the table may be read, minuted, or shanghaied by the intervener. (Notes of importance which must reach the PMC are best sent via the Mess Steward.) In any case, the presumption made on receiving any such note is that it originated with the diner whose place card it originally was. It is for this reason that diners may see others at the dinner immediately pocket their own place cards, a cautionary act often carried out by those who have a history of employing others' cards to send less than complimentary messages.

# Rules of Order

Members are reminded that it is considered poor taste to:

a. commence any dish before the PMC, who will likely pause until the head table has been served;

b. discuss political or other controversial subjects;

c. act in a boisterous manner;

d. propose a toast;

e. talk after the PMC summons attention until he has finished speaking; and

f. leave the table during the meal unless permitted to do so by the PMC.

# Other Notes

a. Shifting of places is not permitted

b. Guests sit to the right of their hosts. If an officer is hosting two guests he sits between them. If he has more than two guests the host should have his guests disposed on either side of him in two groups.

c. Guests should not sit beside each other if it can be avoided.

d. Members of the mess sit from the left side of their seat and stand from the right side.

e. If a male member is sitting next to a lady, then the gentleman should seat her before seating himself.

f. Do not touch anything on the table until after the first Grace.

g. There should never be a vacant seat between two diners. If too many places have been laid, the diners should close in towards the vice-PMC, keeping the numbers on each side of them and at the table as even as possible.

# Conversation

There are no ranks or titles in the mess. All members present address each other as: Mister, Miss, or Misses. Only the PMC and Vice-PMCs will be addressed by title.

No member shall engage in conversation with the Head Table or the opposite table. Members shall only converse with those across, beside, and diagonal from themselves. Do not speak with food in the mouth or gesticulate with utensils in the hand. The conversation should be tactful, kind, responsive, brief and cheerful.

# Missing Aviator (Table) Ceremony

*Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen. Please rise for the playing of O’ Canada, and remain standing for the Missing Aviator Table Ceremony. This evening as we join together to enjoy one another’s company, we pause and pay tribute to those men and women who have made the ultimate sacrifice in war and peace so that we may enjoy the freedom that they sought to ensure for us. Their earthly remains still lay today near to where they fell, throughout the world, in cemeteries, on battlefields, and in countless resting places known only to God. Before we begin I would like to draw your attention to the small table located in a place of honour in front of the head table. This is our way of remembering that many fellow aviators are missing this evening from our midst. They are our brothers and sisters who are unable to return to those whom they love, so we remember them.*

*The table is small symbolizing the frailty of our chosen profession; The tablecloth is white symbolizing the purity of our comrades’ intentions when they answered our country’s call to arms; The single rose displayed in the vase reminds us of their families and loved ones; The red ribbon tied so prominently on the vase is symbolic of the blood they have shed so that we may enjoy freedom; The slice of lemon is set on the bread plate to remind us of their bitter fate; The salt upon the bread plate is symbolic of the family’s tears as they wait for someone who will not return; The glass is inverted for they cannot toast with us this evening; Other chairs are drawn away from the table, for they are not here in body but they are with us in spirit; At this point the appropriate head-dress (air force cap, or wedge, or air force association wedge cap) is slow-marched into the room. The individual places the headdress on the table and takes one step back and bows their head till they hear the last post.*

*For they shall not grow old as we who are left grow old. Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn. At the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we will remember them.*

The LAST POST is played, followed by a minute of silence, then the Lament is played, followed by REVEILLE. At this point the MC will say: Please be seated and I hope enjoy the rest of the evening.

At the conclusion of the evening, the MC will say: “*All rise for the conclusion of our Fallen Aviator Table Ceremony, and the playing of God Save the Queen.”*

The individual designated to retrieve the hat will be slow-marched into the dining room, will come to a halt at the table, bow his or her head, salute, retrieve the hat, and slow-march out of the dining room.

At this point the MC will raise a toast to the Queen of Canada, and God Save the Queen will then be played.

# Table Set Up

1 small (round) table
1 white table cloth
1 single red rose in a vase with a red ribbon tied around the vase placed in the middle of the table
3 plates with a lemon slice on each plate
1 salt shaker beside the rose
3 (wine or water) glasses placed beside the plates inverted.

No additional chairs. The table should be placed on either side of the head table, if no head table it should be placed up at the front of the room by the podium. Alternatively, it may be placed in the centre of all the tables, biased toward a head table indicating its importance.

# People Needed

3 Senior Cadets or association members in full dress uniform, with white gloves and carrying appropriate head dresses.

# An Airman's Grace

Lord of thunder head and sky

Who placed in man the will to fly

Who taught his hand speed, skill and grace

To soar beyond man's dwelling place

You shared with him the eagles view

The right to soar as eagles do

The right to call the clouds his home

And grateful through your heavens roam

May all assembled here tonight

And all who love the thrill of flight

Recall with twofold gratitude

Your gift of Wings, Your gift of food

Amen

Father John W. MacGillivary (deceased)