

Royal Canadian Air Cadets



*A Guide for the
Cadet Mess Dinner*

MESS DINNER PROTOCOL AND TRADITIONS

General

Normally, there will be only one Officers' Mess on a base, in which case the Base Commander, or his representative, will occupy the senior position at the mess dinner. In the event that a particular unit holds a mess dinner, the unit Commanding Officer will fill the senior position. For the purpose of a cadet mess dinner, the term "Officer" means Officers, Civilian Instructors/Volunteers, Cadet NCO's, and Junior Cadets.

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.

386 Komox Squadron continues the tradition of the mess dinner by inviting all cadets and staff to celebrate each other's company in a formal setting. As Air Cadets, it is important to participate in these rich traditions of the Canadian Armed Forces and the Royal Canadian Air Cadets.



PMC - The PMC of the Mess (PMC) is appointed by the Commanding Officer (CO). 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).

Guest - Guests are invited into the mess by the PMC. Each person invited are usually seated at the head table and briefed on the rules of conduct prior to sitting.

Member/Crew - Officers and cadets are considered general members of the mess. Each member shall follow the rules and code of conduct for the mess.

Dress - The dress to be worn at dinner will be specified well in advance and indicated on the invitation. Serving officers wear either Mess Kit or CF Mess Dress at dinner, depending on unit tradition. Retired officers may wear either Mess Dress (with permission of the officer commanding a Command) or appropriate civilian formal attire with miniature medals. Cadets will wear C-8, Same as C-2, except that of white collar dress shirt with a black bowtie, replacing the uniform tie. Civilian guests wear appropriate formal attire while lady guests wear formal evening dress.

Attendance - It must be understood that a mess dinner is a formal parade. Officers will be excused only by their CO or equivalent (PMC) for good or substantial reasons.

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.

Arrival - The time of arrival at a dinner is always set out in the invitation.

NEVER BE LATE.

Invitations to dinner will be worded "1800 for 1830" as an example. This period is designed to meet and greet, allowing hosting officers to peruse the seating plan, seek out and identify their guests, and introduce themselves. Hosts should be there 10 minutes prior to the starting time. The remainder of the time can then be comfortably spent partaking of a beverage with friends before dinner.

When the CO and/or the senior guest arrive, all members shall rise as a form of courtesy. If the arrival of the CO and/or senior guest should be unnoticed by some, the PMC or any other senior officer present should attract attention by discreetly calling "Gentlemen".

Diners will arrive dressed and ready for the event. Members and guests appearing out of dress shall not be allowed to dine.

Mess Call - A trumpeter or Piper, when available, shall make the appropriate calls to announce dinner. During World War II (WW II), Group Captain Fullerton introduced the use of the piper during

a mess dinner to celebrate Robbie Burns Day. The association with the Scottish heraldry has continued with this tradition. The bugler/piper sounds “*Quarter Call*” 15 minutes before dinner and “*Assemble*” at 5 minutes before. (See Annex A). These calls permit personnel to prepare themselves for a lengthy meal. 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. At the appointed time, the 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 ensure that all officers move quickly into the dining room and shall take his position as soon as all cadets have entered the dining room and have taken their places.

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.

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

Note: 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.

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”**.

If there is no chaplain present, the PMC may designate any member to carry out this duty. Afterwards, diners should seat themselves by pulling their chairs to the right and moving to the left side of the chair to sit.

If a Piper is present and has no further official duty for the evening, the Piper's Toast can be done at this time.

The PMC now calls for the piper and the Chief Steward brings two poured drinks in a silver cup to the PMC who offers a toast to the piper. No other diner takes part in this ritual and quietly observes. (See Annex A)

Rules of Order - Every officer must ensure that all guests are being properly hosted. Although guests are normally greeted in the foyer by the CO and PMC, officers must come forward and assist guests in obtaining no expenses of their own. Since a mess dinner is a formal function, protocol dictates that officers' conduct themselves in a manner befitting the occasion. To ensure that all members are afforded the same opportunity to enjoy the evening in the good company of their fellow officers; 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.

Order of Serving - A mess dinner is a formal, multi-course meal. You will be confronted by a formal place setting with your cutlery and several glasses. Before proceeding with the actual dinner a couple of general points must be emphasized. Keep your elbows off the table! A mess dinner is not a race; relax and enjoy it. Do not shovel your food into your mouth. Do not gulp your water and beverages. As far as which knife or fork to use - start at the outside and work in.

When the first course arrives it will be served from your left. The plates will be taken from the right. No dish is ever removed until the last diner has finished eating the course then being served. If dessert is to be served, dessert plates, knives and forks are also placed on the table.

HOW TO USE UTENSILS - Soup is always taken from the side of the spoon. The motion of the spoon is away from the dinner, Never tip the plate to get the last drop, or blow on the soup to cool it. A knife is held in the right hand, cutting edge down, with the index finger extended along the back of the blade. (never cut rolls with a knife, break rolls with the fingers).

Vegetables may be eaten by holding the fork in the right hand prongs up, or in the left hand prongs down. In the latter case the knife is used to help place food on the fork.

The well-bred person is careful not to speak with food in his mouth, or gesticulate with utensils in his hand. The conversation should be tactful, kind, responsive, brief and cheerful. Unpleasant topics should be avoided; to imitate anyone is ill-mannered. Controversial topics such as religion, politics should, by common consent, be avoided.

Tea or coffee cups should not be suspended in the air but raised to the lips, short sips being taken and the cup replaced on the saucer. A teaspoon is not used to taste the tea or coffee but to stir it only. To crook the little finger when lifting a cup looks affected, and affectation of any kind denotes bad manners.

TABLE MANNERS FOR FORMAL AND INFORMAL DINNERS -

POSTURE: One should always sit in an erect position; never loll or lounge or prop elbows on the table. When not occupied with knife and fork, the hands should rest on the lap. Elbows are kept close to the side at all times. The body should be approximately six inches from the table.

Drawing designs on the table cloth with knife and fork, crumbling of bread; beating a tattoo on the table with the silverware, playing with the wine glasses, etc., are all in bad taste. Gentle manners and quietness in eating mark a well-bred person.

Napkins: The table napkin is partly unfolded, not in view of those present but on the lap, and laid flat across the knees. Never tuck it in front of your tunic. After the meal the napkin is not folded, but laid casually on the table.

SILVERWARE: The silverware is laid out in the order in which it is used. The knives to the right of the plate, the forks to the left.

NOTE: Use silverware from outside and working in, in the order of courses.

After Dinner - At the conclusion of the meal, all china, silverware, placemats, flowers, and glasses, with the exception of the port glass, will be removed from the table. If you failed to finish something because you ran out of time, surrender it to the wait staff with grace. 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”.

Port for the Loyal Toast - Port is the name of a drink used for toasting in a mess. An actual drink called Port exists, however, in a cadet mess it is typically replaced by grape juice. If a diner does not wish to take port for the Loyal Toast, s/he may do so with water.

Passing the Port - The loyal toast differs among elements within the CF. 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. In a naval mess the decanters should be slid to the left and never leave the table. Passing the port along the table was implemented for practical reasons, as lifting a heavy decanter off a table in a moving ship might mean the table coming up quickly under the decanter and potentially losing the rest of the precious port.

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.

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

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. In accordance with Canadian Forces custom, the port decanter should never touch the table during this ceremony. Except for the sampling of the port by the PMC, port glasses are not touched until the loyal toast. All diners charge their own glasses and then pass the port decanter to the left.

When the decanters have been passed to all diners, the senior steward reports to the PMC:

“The port has been passed, Sir/Ma’am.”

The PMC then stoppers the decanter and the V/PMC, who follows the lead of the PMC in all respects, follows suit. The actual toast is the same throughout the CF; it is a toast to The Queen of Canada / La Reine du Canada.

The Loyal Toast - The Loyal Toast is always the first 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 may be addressed in French in the following manner,
“Monsieur/Madame le/la Vice PMC(e), à la santé de la Reine du Canada,”

The V/PMC then rises and, addressing the diners, says
“Ladies and Gentlemen, The Queen”
or “Mesdames et Messieurs, la Reine.”

If the PMC addresses the V/PMC in English, the V/PMC replies in French, and vice-versa. At mess dinners of units in which the Sovereign personally holds an honorary appointment, the address to the V/PMC may include that appointment.

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.”* This should be confirmed with the local protocol officer to avoid embarrassment. Finally, march pasts are played. It is customary for all diners to be identified by a march past. Our unit has identified the need for the following march pasts; however, more shall be added if required.

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. CIC Officers should rise for the “La_Feuille_d'Erable”, the march past of the CIC.

Fallen Comrades - It has become customary in some Messes to toast fallen comrades. 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 - After the last toast, coffee and/or liqueurs and or cheese trays may be served. If the Piper was not toasted earlier, this is the correct time to do so. If a piper played at the dinner, the senior officer may toast the piper with the customary “Quaich (kwelx).” Although the toast is traditionally made with straight scotch whisky, either party may choose another beverage, including water. (See Annex A). 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. The mess manager places a chair between the senior officer and senior guest for the bandmaster. After approximately 10 minutes, the bandmaster asks permission to retire and the chef is brought forward in the same manner. Whether these procedures are followed, the PMC will arrange to extend the diners’ appreciation to the band and mess staff sometime during the evening. This toast will precede the speeches. 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.

Reminders:

Toasts - No toast may be offered before the Loyal Toast. Remember: Do NOT drink all the Port for the first two toasts as there may be more to come. You are not allowed to refill your glasses until after the PMC authorizes.

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.

Removal of the Port - The PMC may order the port removed after the toasts are drunk, but it is customary to sit over it and to pass the decanters at least once more.

Speeches - After the toasts have been completed, the PMC may open the floor to speeches by special guests and senior members of the ship. Special presentations may also be made at this time. The PMC may allow the members of the mess to indulge in the open floor.

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.

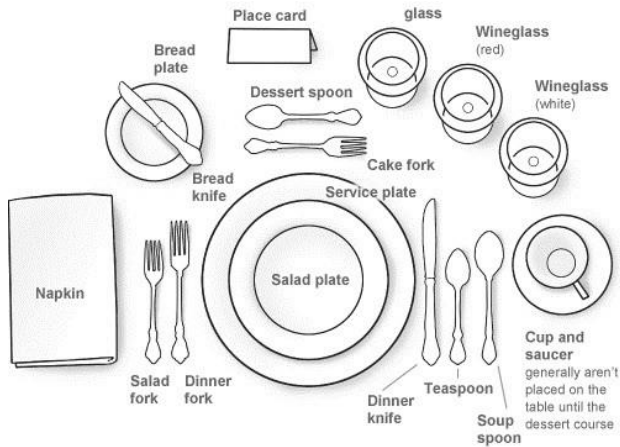
Conversation - There are no ranks or titles in the mess. All members present address each other as: Mister, Miss, or Misses. Only the PMC and Vice-PMCs will be addressed by title. No member shall engage in conversation with the Head Table or the opposite table. Members shall only converse with those 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.

Actions

- a. Male members shall push in the chair of a female member sitting beside them.
- b. The youngest member of the squadron will be chosen to be the honorary CO for the duration of the mess dinner. S/he will be given the respect and title entitled to the position.

- c. It is customary for guests to be introduced to the PMC prior to commencement of the mess function.
- d. No member shall put their elbows on the table during the course of eating.
- e. Prior to departing from the mess, each member must ask for permission to depart from the PMC. If the PMC has already departed, then the next senior member or officer present shall be asked.

TABLE ARRANGEMENT



Salad - You eat this course with the fork on the extreme left. No knife is used with the salad; If you can't pick something up with your fork - leave it! Don't push food onto your fork with your thumb;

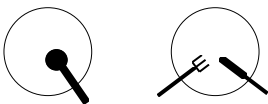
Soup - The next course is the soup. Use the large round spoon on the extreme right;

Fish - May be the next course. Use the next knife and fork that are on the outside of your place-setting;

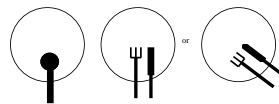
Main Course - You will now use the last knife and fork beside your place setting. Depending on the type of food, you must be satisfied with what you can remove or cut off with your knife and fork. During this course, your beverage glass will be refilled. Do not feel compelled to empty it every time.

Dessert - For this course, use the cutlery that is set in front of you. Unless you are being served a parfait, a spoon and a fork will be set before you. It is not mandatory to use both. This is the end of the meal but not the dinner.

Meal Not Completed



Meal Completed



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. MacGillivray (deceased)