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The traditional Dining In Night, developed over a long succession of decades in the British Army, is held in high regard as an excellent promoter of cordiality, camaraderie, and esprit de corps among officers. Today's dinners continue a custom which first arose in the eighteenth century. At that time, barracks were nonexistent, thus officers and men stayed wherever lodging was available. When a battalion entered a town or village, it would hold a parade and group the banners of the various units in a central meeting place. This place was called the officers Mess and was where the officers met and received their orders from the commander. This meeting evolved into a dinner.

The custom of dining together was established for good reasons. The practice fostered camaraderie in large units in which many officers would not otherwise be likely to come in contact. The dinners entertained guests in the surroundings of tradition and custom of the regiment. Finally the dinners would improve the social etiquette of the officers.

Unlike the British Military, the United States Military has no universal set of formal Dining In rules. The rules are different from region to region and unit to unit. In the East, the dinners arose as stylish affairs among the more social regular and militia units, such as those located near Boston or Philadelphia. In the West, the formal dinners evolved as less stylish events, as officers in outposts deep in Indian territory were generally less concerned with pomp and circumstance.

Today many units in the United States hold annual Dinings In to promote cordiality and fellowship among the officers in their ranks. Traditions and customs are as varied as the units. The Dining In has become an integral part of the officer's social commitments as it enhances bonds of friendship and esprit de corps.

The Dining In attended by the author was somewhat different from those held by regular army units in that, instead of a group of officers, there were officers, the cadret, and cadets. The Dining In consisted of three major parts; the cocktails, the Mess, and the speaker.

During the cocktails the cadret and cadets conversed lightly over drinks. Naturally the cadret's role of teacher spilled over into the conversation, which consisted mainly of the officer's lending of advice to or relating of stories to the cadet concerning his career. Of course, this being a cocktail, the instruction was not handed down as it would be in a classroom, but rather in a more relaxed, less rigid way. One such story dealt with the relationship between an officer and his men. It was told that an officer perceived as uncaring or unreliable by his men would be shot in the back by his men during combat. From the cocktails, everyone adjourned to the Mess.

The Mess was more formally structured than the cocktails. It consisted of three segments; the toasts, the meal, and the points of order. The toasts were to M.I.A.'s, the Flag, and to the President of these United States as well

as other various patriotic subjects numbering in the twenties. It was considered poor taste and a violation of the Mess not to drink to each toast. The meal was cornish hen with rice. Each tables lowest ranking member was designated the gunner, whose duty it was to maintain the wine glasses between two-thirds full and empty.

The points of order were a vehicle for good humor and entertainment among the Mess. The officers of the Mess were Mr. Vice and Mr. President, the battalion commander. Points of order are violations of the Mess on the part of individual members being brought to the attention of Mr. Vice by another member. Mr. Vice would then confer with Mr. President about the fine, if any, to be assessed the member in violation. Fines ranged from twenty-five cents to a dollar. The points of order and resultant volleys of insults, all in good humor, were the source of much entertainment for the Mess.

The speaker for the Mess was Command Seargent Major (retired) Lester W. Conover Jr. He spoke on the attitudes of society towards veterans from WWI thru Vietnam and the importance of Veterans Day.

After the speech and some belated points of order, Mr. President dismissed the Mess.

The history of the Dining In is deeply seated in tradition. The colonists brought the custom of the Dining In from Britain where it had evolved since the early 1700's from a central meeting place to a formal dinner in order to ideally function as a social vehicle for professional

officers. Once in the United States the Dinings In diversified to suit the the varied tastes and customs of the regions in which various units were located. The carrying over of custom from the Old Country, Britain, to the new, the United States and resultant continuation of tradition in new variations is folklore in much the same manner the singing games of young black girls in Los Angeles are. The variation of tradition and custom from region to region is folklore in much the same manner that the variations of chili across the country are regional folklore. The story about the officer getting shot in the back which was told during the cocktails to the author is exemplary of labor lore and folk legend. Finally and most importantly, the Dining In serves an important purpose in its as folklore should. It is the one organized event which allows for a changing of the usally rigid rules and chain of command in military life. This providesfor informal conversation and humor and friendships to transcend the ranks in the military. The Dining In contains all of these aspects of folklore which are an integral part of military life.


