

NAVAL MESS DINNER

GENERAL

1. The following has been taken from the *NOTC Manual of Canadian Naval Etiquette*, Edition One, January 1990.
2. Tradition remains to this day one of the prime ingredients in naval *esprit-de-corps*. Over the course of centuries, the Royal Navy acquired numerous customs and usages which the Canadian Navy has readily assimilated.
3. There is a definite obligation for officers to attend a Mess Dinner unless excused either through duty or illness. All officers will be levied an assessment to offset the costs.

**WEARING
APPAREL**

4. Civilians should wear business attire.
5. Traditionally, naval officers should wear a hand-knotted bow tie.
6. The president is in absolute charge of the table regardless of rank, branch or seniority. He/She may levy fines or take any other action he/she deems necessary to maintain discipline.
7. Should the officer appointed vice-president be unable to attend the dinner, it is his/her responsibility to find a substitute.

**HOUR OF
SERVING**

8. Dinner is normally served at 2000 hrs, although this may be amended as the situation dictates. Invitations for a dinner commencing at 2000 hrs will usually read *1930 for 2000*. This indicates a 30-minute period allowing for a sociable gathering.

ENTRY

9. At 2000 hrs the senior steward reports to the president, "*Dinner is served, Sir/Madam/Ma'am*". The president, accompanied by the senior guest, leads the way into the mess. The other diners follow the president. It is incorrect for anyone to enter into the mess ahead of the president.
10. The president assumes his/her place while the others take their places without regard to rank. No one should sit before the president has taken his/her place. For most Mess Dinners a seating plan is provided.
11. In most cases, an unfinished drink is a lost drink as glasses are not to be taken to the table. If special guests are present, the president designates whether drinks can be taken into the dining area.

SEATING

12. The president sits at the head of the table. At a large table, this is in the centre of the head table; at a small one, it is the end nearest the door.
13. The vice-president sits opposite the president, or, when at a small table, farthest away from him/her.
14. Guests sit to the right of their host. If the host has two guests, they sit on either side of him/her.
15. A host with three or more guests should have the guests disposed on either side of him/her in two groups. Avoid placing guests immediately next to each other.
16. Should there be mess guests—i.e., guests who have been invited by the mess as a whole—the guest of honour sits on the president's right and the next in importance sits on his/her left.
17. Any other mess guests should be seated, if possible, with a member of the mess on either side.
18. As well, the vice-president should attend to mess guests present and seat those not with the president on either side of himself/herself whenever possible.
19. There should never be a vacant seat between two diners. If too many places have been laid, the diners should close in towards the president and vice-president, keeping the numbers on each side of them and at the table as even as possible.

COMMENCEMENT

20. When everyone is seated, the senior steward reports to the president, "*Officers seated, Sir/Madam/Ma'am*", and states whether or not a chaplain is present.
21. The president taps the table for silence.
22. If there is a chaplain present, he/she says grace.

**RULES OF
ORDER**

23. If there is no chaplain present, the president may say grace or he/she can designate an officer to carry out this duty. (There is usually an officer at either end of the head table.) The normal prayer is *“For what we are about to receive, thank God”*. The popular idea that the normal naval grace is simply *“Thank God”* is entirely incorrect. The normal prayer after the meal is: *“For what we have received, thank God”*.
24. As soon as the president has tapped the table for grace, the following rules are rigidly enforced:
- a. Without the president's permission, no one may:
 - (1) enter and seat themselves at the table,
 - (2) leave the table,
 - (3) return to the table,
 - (4) read (except the menu and musical programme),
 - (5) write,
 - (6) have a second helping of any course, or
 - (7) speak to anyone not dining, except stewards, and this should be kept to a minimum.
 - b. If a diner is near enough to the president to ask his/her permission personally, the diner may do so. If the president is too far away, the diner will send a steward to the president with the request.
 - c. No diner may do the following:
 - (1) commence a course before the president,
 - (2) smoke before the Loyal Toast. The president will light up first or give permission to carry on smoking. This rule depends entirely on the local rules for smoking. As the normal rule is *No Smoking* in military establishments, members may have to wait until they have an opportunity to go outside before they light up,
 - (3) utter an oath or use foul language,
 - (4) place a bet or wager,
 - (5) discuss political or other controversial subjects,
 - (6) talk shop,
 - (7) mention a specific sum of money, or
 - (8) propose a toast.

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**ORDER OF
SERVING**

- d. If a diner has been granted permission to sit down late or return to the table, he/she continues with the course then being eaten or served, unless the president gives him/her permission to eat the course which was missed.
- e. Whenever the president or vice-president summons attention, there must be complete silence until they have finished speaking.

- 25. Mess guests are served before the president, and other guests are served before their respective hosts.
- 26. No dish is ever removed until the last diner has finished eating the course then being served.
- 27. If dessert is to be served, dessert plates, knives and forks are also placed on the table.
- 28. When the last course has been eaten, the stewards clear the table of everything (except the table decorations and port glasses) and sweep up the crumbs.

**PASSING THE
PORT**

- 29. When the table is cleared, the senior steward reports to the president, *"Table cleared, Sir/Madam/Ma'am"*.
- 30. The president taps the table for silence and grace is said as before; the customary prayer being: *"For what we have received, thank God"*.
- 31. The port is then placed on the table. In a small mess it is placed before the president; in larger ones it is also placed before the vice-president. As well, in larger messes other officers may also have decanters placed in front of them.
- 32. When the decanters are all placed on the table, the senior steward reports to the president: *"The port is ready to pass, Sir/Madam/Ma'am"*.

**THE LOYAL
TOAST**

33. The president passes the decanters one at a time to his/her left; the other officers doing likewise. Remember—the president and other officers in charge of the decanters do not pour their own drinks before passing the decanters.
34. The decanters should remain at least one place setting apart during their trip around the table. They should never be allowed to *pile up* beside a diner.
35. If due to a shortage of diners there is a gap at the end of the table, the stewards in that area should move the decanters across it.
36. After the port has been passed, the stewards move the stoppers so that they end up beside their decanters.
37. No one may touch his/her port until the Loyal Toast has been proposed.
38. When the port has been passed and all decanters have reached their destination, the senior steward reports to the president, *“The port has been passed, Sir/Madam/Ma’am”*.
39. The president now replaces the stoppers in the decanters in front of him/her and the other officers follow suit.
40. The president taps the table for silence and says: *“Mister/Madam Vice, the Queen”*.
41. If there is a band in attendance it plays six bars of *“God Save the Queen”*, after which the vice-president responds, *“Ladies and Gentlemen, the Queen”*. Either the direction or the Loyal Toast is given in French, the sequence to be determined in advance by the president.
42. All diners raise their glasses and repeat *“The Queen”* and drink the toast.

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43. The health of Her Majesty the Queen should be honoured, seated, in all naval messes, whether on board ship or on shore, on all occasions except:
- a. when the Queen or member of the Royal Family is present at the dinner. The toast is then given while standing unless Her Majesty or the member of the Royal Family requests that it be given seated. (The pleasure of the royal personage should be sought beforehand); and
 - b. when toasts to foreign heads of State are included. These toasts, as well as the one to *"The Queen"*, should be drunk standing whether National Anthems are played or not.
- PORT FOR THE LOYAL TOAST** 44. If a diner does not wish to take port for the Loyal Toast, he/she may do so with water.
45. Except in the case of guests, this is the only occasion at which a diner may not accept a glass of port to drink this toast, it being a point of honour for each diner to pay for his/her port.
- TOASTS OF THE DAY** 46. There is no official record of the original Toasts of the Day. However, these were popular in Nelson's day, although they have been amended to adjust to changing times and situations:
- Monday - Our Ships
 - Tuesday - Our Sailors
 - Wednesday - Ourselves
 - Thursday - Our Navy
 - Friday - Our Nation
 - Saturday - Our Families
 - Sunday - Absent Friends
- SMOKING** 47. After the toasts have been drunk, the rules are relaxed and cigars and cigarettes may be passed depending on the regulations of the unit conducting the dinner.
48. One must never light up before the president has given his/her permission.
49. Pipes may not be smoked without the president's permission.

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**PORT
GUARDIANS**

50. At this point in the dinner, with the permission of the president, anyone who wishes to may now leave the table with the exception of officers in charge of the port. If they wish to leave, they must pass the decanters on to the officer on the left. If an officer in charge of the port, whether the president himself/herself or another, leaves the table without finding a new guardian, the port may be passed at the offender's expense until the decanters which he/she has deserted are empty.

**REMOVAL OF
THE PORT**

51. The president 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.

52. After the decanters are passed the second time, the stoppers are left off until the port is finally removed upon the president's order.

53. Should the president or other officers guarding the port desire a refill, they are not at liberty to pick up the decanter in front of them and fill their glasses. They must wait until the port is again passed.

54. The president may discipline any diner for misbehaviour during the dinner. He/She has two alternatives:

- a. order the culprit to leave the mess; or
- b. warn him/her.

55. An officer coming late to dinner may:

- a. have his/her excuse accepted;
- b. be refused permission to dine; or
- c. be fined.

FINES

56. Fines may vary from a monetary amount to a single drink, to drinks for all present.

57. The president may award the drinks to any diner or diners he/she chooses to name, including himself/herself.

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**BANDMASTER
AND
CHIEF COOK**

58. The vice-president may warn or fine the president.
59. Fines imposed upon a guest must be paid for by his/her host.
60. Fines are nearly always paid in port or other drinks in which the toasts are drunk.
61. Fines are never paid until after the toasts have been drunk.
62. No diner who has not drunk the toasts in port may accept payment of a fine.
63. Toasts may never be drunk in port that has been served as payment of a fine.
64. Fines are sometimes paid in liqueurs, in which case these rules do not apply. However, this is seldom done and such a fine is generally imposed only for a flagrant breach of good manners committed after the toasts have been drunk.
65. If the band is in attendance at dinner, it is customary for the president to invite the bandmaster and, optionally, the chief cook to join him/her in a glass of port after the toasts have been drunk. A chair is placed beside the president for the bandmaster/chief cook when the invitation is issued.