

The Importance of the Military Mess

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Military messes contribute to fighting power¹ by acting as a nexus point that enhances unit esprit de corps, cultivates leadership attributes, and fosters a binding military ethos. By performing this role, a mess contributes to the development and strengthening of the moral component of fighting power, which ‘embodies those individual and organisational characteristics that are fundamental to success — morale, integrity, values, and legitimacy’². Regrettably, few authentic messes remain and I believe that as members we have become morally dislocated from institutions that once acted as wardens of tradition and principle. The institution of the mess is an important instrument for the development of leadership, the delivery of professional military education, instilling and fostering of ethos, and developing resilience. In this article I will establish the importance of the military mess by examining the role it plays in three aspects of the profession of arms: soldiering, ethos and behaviour.

Soldiering

*War is mangled bodies and shattered minds. It is the stomach-churning reek of decaying corpses, of burning flesh and faeces. It is rape, disease, and displacement. It is terrible beyond comprehension, but it is not senseless. Wars are purposeful. They are fought for resources, lebensraum, oil, gold, food, and water or peculiarly abstract and imaginary goods like God, honor, race, democracy, and destiny*³.

The foundation doctrine for Army, *LWD 1 The Fundamentals of Land Power*, stresses the significance of individual moral character in regards to developing and sustaining fighting power. It is for this reason that the mess is important, as it is in this environment where soldiering is given perspective and the human factors of culture, ethos and behavior contextualised. Soldiering is distinctive in that it involves the navigation of battle, a setting that Clausewitz considered to consist of danger, uncertainty, and chance. As an endeavor that involves the delivery and potential receipt of physical harm or death it should be obvious that ‘fortitude of mind and character are needed’⁴. War is an undertaking radically dissimilar from other human endeavors⁵, and though an important defining aspect of the Australian national ethos and identity, our populace do not consider themselves a military people. The great heroes of Australian are mostly sporting personalities⁶. As

¹ LWD 1 The Fundamentals of Land Power, Australian Army, Commonwealth of Australia, 2014.

² LWD 1 The Fundamentals of Land Power, Australian Army, Commonwealth of Australia, 2014, 50.

³ Smith, David Livingstone. *The Most Dangerous Animal*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007, 7.

⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Howard and Paret, 69; quoted in Powers and Tremain, *Total War*, 107.

⁵ Clausewitz, Carl von and Anatol Rapoport. *On War*. Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1982, 254.

⁶ Grey, Jeffrey. *A Military History Of Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 3 - 4.

such, apart from sporadic media reporting, the Army functions principally out of view of the majority of the population and political leaders⁷ - most of society is blissfully ignorant of the role and responsibilities of their soldiers. Therefore it is important that attributes and traits desirable in Australian soldiers should be intentionally inculcated and the role of the soldier defined – the mess achieves this.

A unique calling, soldiering ‘requires peculiar qualifications of understanding and soul’⁸. Those who answer the call to martial service have an expectation and a need to receive not only a financial but a psychological salary. Soldiers are nourished by pride, honor, the chance to be part of something larger, valor or glory, and colleagues for whom they would trade their lives⁹. This sentiment is often dismissed as romanticism or pithy idealism; however it was not pay and conditions that compelled soldiers to move toward the enemy at Lone Pine, Kokoda or Afghanistan. Soldiering requires a distinctive culture, ethos and character, and these must be carefully nourished and fortified. Neglecting the development of these characteristics is as disastrous a mistake as utilising inferior equipment or conducting inadequate training. Importantly, when considered as an aspect of the profession of arms, the moral component of fighting power forms the underlying sentiment that informs, sustains and drives the physical and intellectual components.

Ethos and Values

The values necessary to defend that society are often at odds with the values of the society itself. To be an effective servant of the people the army must concentrate not on values of our liberal society, but on hard values of the battlefield...We must recognize that this military community differs from the civilian community from which it springs. The civilian community exists to promote the quality of life; the military community exists to fight and, if need be, to die in defense of that quality of life. We must not apologize for these differences. The people...are served by soldiers disciplined to obey the orders of their leaders, and hardened and conditioned to survive the rigors of the battlefield. We do neither our soldiers nor our people any favors if we ignore these realities.

General Walter T. Kerwin, Commander of US Army Forces Command, 1974¹⁰.

Soldiering includes the acceptance of service primacy over personal needs, and submission to military discipline, authority and conditions. Essential to this is the establishment and sustainment of an ethos that harmonises societal origins with military service. Above all and simplistically,

⁷ Cook, Martin L. *The Moral Warrior*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004, ix.

⁸ Clausewitz, Carl von and Anatol Rapoport. *On War*. Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1982, 138.

⁹ Pressfield, Steven. *The Warrior Ethos*. Los Angeles: Black Irish Entertainment, 2011, 34-35.

¹⁰ Ozkaptan, Halim, Corsbie E. Saint and Fiero, Robert, *Conquering Fear - Development of Courage In Soldiers and Other High Risk Occupations*, Lulu Press, 2014, 71.

soldiering involves the readiness to sacrifice one's own life and that of others¹¹, and soldiers drawn from Australian society must be developed to reflect this reality¹². Due to the nature of martial service it would be inappropriate for a military culture to exactly replicate that of its parent society; however it is inevitable that Australian military culture will be influenced by national context and history¹³. The challenge now is to develop the young people of today to understand, adopt and apply the core values of 'selfless commitment, courage, discipline, integrity, loyalty and respect for others'¹⁴, additional to pre-enlistment values. Messes serve as a mechanism for the transfer of ethos and values. Junior members take their cues from their seniors, example must be provided and mentoring delivered¹⁵, in this way standards and principles at the core of Australian military culture, tradition and history is transferred¹⁶. Military messes must act as more than a bistro, they should both preserve and perpetuate the character of the Australian profession of arms.

H.R. McMaster asserts that 'it is the warrior ethos that permits soldiers to see themselves as part of an ongoing historical community', one that sustains itself via a covenant that binds them to one another and to the society they serve¹⁷. Junior members of any mess fashion their professional character on the foundation of their immersion in the enduring chronicle of service¹⁸; and there is no task more important in the development ethos. Preparation for war involves not only the physical but also mental, the forging of will and the fostering of resilience. Soldiers over history have been expected to conduct themselves in a manner so abstract from civilized normality that many crumble. 'Battle is the most violent and frightening of all human activities', challenging to describe and impossible to understand via second hand narrative¹⁹. As such, contextualizing violence and killing before and after the fact is important to the mental wellbeing of soldiers of all ranks. They must be introduced, exposed and conditioned to possess the personal resilience to enter and endure the ordeal, whilst surviving the aftereffects. The social confines of the mess once provided a setting for this type of exchange and should be used as such now.

¹¹ Evans, Michael and Alan Ryan. *The Human Face Of Warfare*. St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2000, 81.

¹² Evans, Michael, Alan Ryan, and Russell Parkin. *Future Armies, Future Challenges*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2004, 242.

¹³ Shamir, Eitan. *Transforming Command*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Security Studies, 2011. 20.

¹⁴ Reed, Charles and David Ryall. *The Price Of Peace*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, xv.

¹⁵ Murray, Williamson and Richard Hart Sinnreich. *The Past As Prologue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 11.

¹⁶ Murray, Williamson and Richard Hart Sinnreich. *The Past As Prologue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 262.

¹⁷ McMaster, H.R, 'Remaining True to Our Values – Reflections on Military Ethics in Trying Times', *Journal of Military Ethics*, 9:3, 2010, 195.

¹⁸ Osiel, Mark. *Obeying Orders*. New Brunswick, N.J., U.S.A.: Transaction Publishers, 1999, 21.

¹⁹ Pratten, Garth and Glyn Harper. *Still The Same*. Georges Heights, NSW: Army Doctrine Centre, 1996, 9.

For the soldier, there is a great mental cost in delivering of violence and destruction upon other humans²⁰. A way to combat this is via intimate knowledge of each other, the provision of support, and the harnessing of a group strength that sustains individual soldiers; the aspiration should be the creation of a tight, cohesive and resilient unit²¹. The military mess grew out of the need to build and reinforce this cohesion. Mental preparation for combat in order to counter battle stress, PTSD, and mental injury should be first and foremost in the minds of the Army, ensuring its members are mentally and physically hardened²². This can be achieved by discussion, rumination and shaping in the mess. As the Army continues to struggle with how to best prepare personnel for combat, the mess provides a part response to this dilemma. A tool that if appropriately supported contributes to mental preparation, can provide support prior, during and after the receipt of injury, and act as a mitigating instrument by forging resolve.

Another issue in which the Mess plays a role is in addressing the difference in value sets between civilian and military life – particularly for Australian youth today. Individual and collective loyalty, responsibility and commitment are essential to the modern soldier. However, values and principles compatible and complementary to military service are in many ways conflicting with those of modern Australia. Western civilian societies, such as Australia, prize singular autonomy and freedom above all else²³. Conversely, a successful military culture places a higher value on cohesion and obedience; a soldier is not free to do whatever they desire²⁴. The disparity between civilian and military continues in multiple other areas:

‘Civilian society rewards wealth and celebrity. Military culture prizes honor. Aggression is valued in a warrior culture. In civilian life, you can go to jail for it. A warrior culture trains for adversity. Luxury and ease are the goals advertised to the civilian world. Sacrifice, particularly shared sacrifice, is considered an opportunity for honor in a warrior culture. Selflessness is a virtue in a warrior culture. Civilian society gives lip service to this, while frequently acting as selfishly as it possibly can’²⁵.

²⁰ Pressfield, Steven. *The Warrior Ethos*. Los Angeles: Black Irish Entertainment, 2011, 69.

²¹ McKay, Gary. *In Good Company*. St Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 1998, 187.

²² Mansford, George. *Junior Leadership On The Battlefield*. Georges Heights, N.S.W.: Headquarters Training Command, Australian Army, 1994, 16; Dunt, D, *Review of Mental Health Care in the ADF and Transition through Discharge*, 2009, 18.

²³ Pressfield, Steven. *The Warrior Ethos*. Los Angeles: Black Irish Entertainment, 2011, 71-72.

²⁴ Vane, Michael and Toguchi, Robert, ‘Achieving Excellence in Small-Unit Performance’, *Military Review*, May-June, 2010, 79.

²⁵ Pressfield, Steven. *The Warrior Ethos*. Los Angeles: Black Irish Entertainment, 2011, 71-72.

Principles and values of service are passed their authority and integrity from institutional rituals and customs²⁶, which are hypothetically held, cherished and maintained in the mess; at least we tell ourselves this. The nature of war is enduring; however there is a tension between the Army and the society from which it draws its human capital²⁷. Importantly, induction into the military profession does not mean departing from civilian cultural and societal values. Rather, it encompasses a commitment to the Army, an obligation to right and moral action, and an authentic devotion to the nation and each other. A robust and healthy mess environment confronts this friction between cultures by facilitating the adoption of an ethos conducive to military service. To be effective as a professional warfighting organisation the Army must contain soldiers of unquestionable moral fibre. Infusing soldiers and officers with a virtuous and honourable ethos will result in a reduction of ethically questionable actions; ensuring application of violence is moderated by 'self-restraint and guided by moral principle'²⁸. In this capacity the mess offers an institution for the imbuing of traits essential for operational effectiveness; a school for moral courage, honour, and virtue²⁹. Possession of an aptitude for empathy and self-discipline strengthens soldiers, this goes beyond the execution of state sanctioned violence³⁰. Youthful passions require tempering and at times quenching, this must be completed in an appropriate setting and context to ensure values are enduring. Furthermore, empathy and patience are characteristics essential to a soldier in the multifaceted battlespace of today, where they mentor and support as much as they are directed to kill³¹. From this vantage, logic dictates that individual character be grounded in the values of traditional chivalry and soldierly honor³² - this should not and cannot be taught in a classroom and there is no other environment or mechanism for this type of mentoring to take place.

Whilst the Army is developing into a more agile and adaptable organisation³³, awareness of issues via biannual mandatory training does not adequately drive ethos or shape appropriate conduct. Ethos must be generated internally, instilled in accordance with the sanctioned policies, but then needs to be self-regulating and a significant point of pride – the mess can achieve this, PowerPoint saturation does not. Current mechanisms can and should be augmented by a campaign to imbue

²⁶ Schmidtchen, David, *Eyes Wide Open: Stability, Change and Network-Enabling Technology*, Working Paper No. 129, Land Warfare Studies Centre, 2009, 8.

²⁷ Efflandt, Scott and Reed, Brian, 'Developing the Warrior Scholar', *Military Review*, July-August, 2001, 1.

²⁸ Pressfield, Steven. *The Warrior Ethos*. Los Angeles: Black Irish Entertainment, 2011, 78.

²⁹ Farwell, Byron. *Mr. Kipling's Army*. New York: Norton, 1981, 62; Evans, Michael, 'Captains of the Soul', *Naval War College Review*, Winter, Vol. 64, No. 1, 2011, 2.

³⁰ Pressfield, Steven. *The Warrior Ethos*. Los Angeles: Black Irish Entertainment, 2011, 78.

³¹ Krause, Michael, *Square Pegs for Round Holes: Current Approaches to Future Warfare and the Need to Adapt*, Working Paper No. 132, Land Warfare Studies Centre, 2007, 36.

³² Osiel, Mark. *Obeying Orders*. New Brunswick, N.J., U.S.A.: Transaction Publishers, 1999, 23.

³³ Rahman, C, *Inquiry into the Economic, Social and Strategic Trends in Australia's region and the consequences for our Defence Requirements, Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade – Defence Sub Committee Inquiry into Australia's Regional Strategic Defence Requirements, 2006, 3.*

values, which view inappropriate behaviour, unrestrained violence and poor/toxic leadership as irreversible and unforgivable betrayals. Subtle and command led methods can be used in the reduction of inappropriate behaviour, domestic violence, and substance abuse³⁴. Causal factors for these transgressions are normally ritualised tribalism, acceptance of inappropriate cultural norms, and a non-inclusive environment³⁵, as such not absorbing Army's youth into its social institutions to neutralise these issues is illogical, counterproductive and irresponsible. Cultural issues should be addressed by the adoption of morally appropriate behaviors but encouragement is insufficient³⁶. The mess offers an extremely fertile setting for achieving this; a venue for the continuous reinforcement of 'messages about behavioral and cultural change expectations'³⁷. The Mess gifts the Army a venue and atmosphere in which it can regularly saturate individuals at all levels, ranks and experience with values that are deeply felt and genuinely adopted.

Behaviour

For many among men are they who set high the show of honor, yet break justice.

Agamemnon - Aeschylus³⁸.

The mess provides the Army with an already existing apparatus that can both prepare its members for war and remediate inappropriate social activity, as opposed to relying exclusively on institutional mandatory packages; an untrustworthy approach to cultural evolution³⁹. It is a place where the issues of inappropriate behaviour can be addressed through discussion, example and direct or subtle fault correction. An incorrect understanding of military culture has habitually intensified flawed judgment and behaviour, therefore it is essential that commanders shape individuals and groups; and measures must go beyond compliance with extant rules and

³⁴ Broderick, E, Baird, M, Mostyn, S, Ney, M, Powell, D, *Review into the Treatment of Women in the Australian Defence Force*, Phase 2 Report, Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012, 22-34.

³⁵ Broderick, E, Baird, M, Mostyn, S, Ney, M, Powell, D, *Review into the Treatment of Women in the Australian Defence Force*, Phase 2 Report, Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012, 22 Orme, C, *Beyond Compliance: Professionalism, Trust And Capability In The Australian Profession Of Arms*, Report Of The ADF Personal Conduct Review, Department of Defence, 2011, 19; and *Pathway to Change: Evolving Defence Culture*, Department of Defence, 2012, 6.

³⁶ Orme, C, *Beyond Compliance: Professionalism, Trust And Capability In The Australian Profession Of Arms*, Report Of The ADF Personal Conduct Review, Department of Defence, 2011, 6.

³⁷ ADF Alcohol Management Strategy and Plan 2014-2017, Department of Defence, 2013, 8; *Pathway to Change: Evolving Defence Culture*, Department of Defence, 2012, 6; (Broderick, E, Baird, M, Mostyn, S, Ney, M, Powell, D, *Review into the Treatment of Women in the Australian Defence Force*, Phase 2 Report, Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012, 29.

³⁸ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, in Grene, David, and Richmond Lattimore. *Greek Tragedies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

³⁹ Efflandt, Scott and Reed, Brian, 'Developing the Warrior Scholar', *Military Review*, July-August, 2001, 1; Orme, C, *Beyond Compliance: Professionalism, Trust And Capability In The Australian Profession Of Arms*, Report Of The ADF Personal Conduct Review, Department of Defence, 2011, 5.

regulations⁴⁰. I believe the mess is the best platform for the promotion of responsible attitudes towards all aspects of social conduct via experiential learning, the example of seniors and the development of collective moral standards. A resident command group should use the mess to address issues such as misconduct, unconscious bias, ‘drivers of the behaviour that excessive alcohol unmasks’, and other cultural shortfalls⁴¹; this is not achievable if the mess is used or resourced only as a well furnished eatery.

Commanders are responsible for creating and maintaining a ‘healthy organisational culture’⁴². I strongly believe the mess is the place where this can and should occur. The mess is near perfect for the ‘socialising’ of cultural norms and expectations within the Army. It is a setting where Commanders can set the example for professional and personal conduct⁴³, demonstrating via their own behaviour the left and right of arc. Discussion, example and establishing social measures that highlight an ‘inclusive and gender equal culture’, whilst disrupting the dominant place of alcohol in bonding and mateship is important to the health and capability of the Army⁴⁴. Importantly, the mess can be used to sincerely reinforce respect as a characteristic. It commences with a healthy respect for superiors, who demonstrate high regard for guests, subordinates and traditions and this in turn becomes emulation. Respect for the opposite sex can also be taught via observing the treatment and esteem afforded to those in the mess of the opposite sex. This is where members of all ranks and gender can learn etiquette for interacting, hosting and treating anyone; whether it is a fellow uniformed member or the partner of a peer, subordinate or senior colleague. Coupled with this the Army must create an environment where newly independent members can test and adjust within a safe space. This is important, as a large portion of the Army consists of adolescents pursuing and acquiring experiences like their peers on the outside. They are grasping for physical and emotional maturity, undoing links to their family, expanding their friendship network, developing their sexuality, and experimenting with alcohol⁴⁵. The mess should be a place where they feel accepted and recognised as a safe environment where minor professional and social mistakes are considered learning opportunities, set against the clearest and common standards of behaviour

⁴⁰ Orme, C, *Beyond Compliance: Professionalism, Trust And Capability In The Australian Profession Of Arms*, Report Of The ADF Personal Conduct Review, Department of Defence, 2011, 34.

⁴¹ Orme, C, *Beyond Compliance: Professionalism, Trust And Capability In The Australian Profession Of Arms*, Report Of The ADF Personal Conduct Review, Department of Defence, 2011, 19-20, 34

⁴² Broderick, E, Baird, M, Mostyn, S, Ney, M, Powell, D, *Review into the Treatment of Women in the Australian Defence Force*, Phase 2 Report, Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012, 24.

⁴³ *Pathway to Change: Evolving Defence Culture*, Department of Defence, 2012, 6.

⁴⁴ Broderick, E, Baird, M, Mostyn, S, Ney, M, Powell, D, *Review into the Treatment of Women in the Australian Defence Force*, Phase 2 Report, Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012, 20; Hamilton, M, *The use of alcohol in the Australian Defence Force*, Department of Defence, 2011, 57.

⁴⁵ Hamilton, M, *The use of alcohol in the Australian Defence Force*, Department of Defence, 2011, 64.

The Defence White Paper 2016 states that ‘the quality of our people is the foundation of Defence's capability, effectiveness and reputation’⁴⁶. An historical example serves well when examining this. When Lycurgus reformed Sparta, he expanded and improved the concept of the mess. His intent was not just for them to be a venue to take food and drink. Rather, it was intended to be a mechanism to force military ethos and to act as a mentoring-developmental mechanism for junior warriors⁴⁷. For the mess to best nourish and encourage the moral aspect of fighting power we should channel Lycurgus’ intent; in the here and now it must evolve and transform to meet the needs of the members. Each mess has unique needs, reflecting the environment, membership and institution within which it resides; a schoolhouse mess will differ from one in a Combat Brigade or a formation headquarters. Ownership is extremely important, the mess must be responsive to the members and the uniqueness of the service, a soulless standardised commercial solution is ineffective and works at cross-purposes to the environment a mess is intended to provide.

Conclusion

The recently released COMD FORCOMD Messing Directive suggests Army recognises the vital cultural and social role such institutions play, and that in recent years this has been an area of underfunding. I believe, however, that more needs to be done in terms of investment and energy. Messes serve to provide instruction in the areas of social comportment, character development and leadership. The mess environment also fosters the imbuing of individual and collective loyalty, ethos and values that potentially lessen misconduct. Soldiering is a unique endeavor, requiring attitudes and behaviours that are difficult to imbue; it is these human aspects that truly enable us as a mechanism built for application of violence. In the Mess, the consumption of food and drink is subordinate to the development of the moral aspects of fighting power; the mess exists to foster ethos and harmonise military service with individual needs. The future of the Army is sustained by its junior leaders, it is their contribution that will determine capability, and messes are the best mechanism to nurture their moral and intellectual fighting potential.

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⁴⁶ *Defence White Paper 2016*, Department of Defence, 2016, 25.

⁴⁷ Plutarch., et al. *Plutarch On Sparta*. London: Penguin, 2005, 12-15.

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