

HOW'S THE COW?

In which Eastgate reflects upon the delights of the CSC Mess

The Mess was a central focus of cadet life, not just because three meals per day were taken within its confines but also because it was the scene of some of the more ferocious aspects of Fourth Class training. It also provided an opportunity for the senior cadets to bastardise Fourth Class cadets from companies other than their own.

The Mess consisted of a central dining area in an “H” shape on the upper floor of the building which also housed the cadet duty room, accommodation for the BSM, BQMS and the trophy room. The kitchen sat within the arms of one end of the “H” backing on to the Gymnasium, while the front of the Mess at the opposite end overlooked the Flag Station and the Parade Ground. Common rooms for the exclusive use each of First and Second Class were on either side of the front entrance.

CSC Mess, Grad Week 1996



Each table in the cadet's mess was presided over by members of First Class, either individually or in pairs. The BSM's table was front and centre of the mess, directly opposite the “days-to-go” board which hung

centrally between the servery doors of the mess kitchen. The BQMS, CSM's, Colour Sergeants and other senior cadets then fanned out through the mess in a diminishing rank order.

Each table seated eight cadets, one at either end and three along each side. First Class normally sat at the end of the table closest to the nearest wall, so that they could survey all before them in the manner of cautious Mafia Dons. Given the behaviour of some members of First Class, the practice was not out of place.

Etiquette was that that First Class invited members of other classes to join them at their table, and those seating arrangements generally remained in place for a term, so that First, Second and Third Class always sat at the same table, sitting down from the head of the table in a strict class ranking.

Fourth Class's first meal in the Mess in the company of the other cadets was the Saturday lunch after we returned from our summer idyll by the Murrumbidgee at the end of February. Any attempt to sit at a table without firstly observing the correct etiquette brought a sharp rebuke and a direction to “bog away” and sit elsewhere. Since at this stage we knew nothing about such things nor the names of the senior class, rejection rather than acceptance was the order of the day.

The noise in the mess was horrendous, and I am left with a memory of shell shocked Fourth Class wandering about in search of a seat while the whole world seemed to be shouting at the top of its voice. Some managed not to find a seat for the whole meal.

After the first few weeks and once they became known to the Senior Classes, Fourth Class would be invited to join a table for a week, although these invitations were not always sought and were rarely offered in a spirit of welcome camaraderie. Table changes normally occurred each Monday.

The ordeal began with breakfast, which started at 0700. Defaulters parade concluded at 0655, allowing cadets from more remote accommodation blocks to leave their rifle and webbing in the Mess foyer and to hang their caps on the pegs lining the two stair cases leading into the Mess.

In winter, when we wore woollen battle dress, loutish oafs in the senior classes would sometimes hang those cadets of a diminutive stature from those same hooks by the lapels of their battle dress jackets. Dangling so that their feet barely touched the stairs they would wriggle and squirm until they could release themselves or be released.

Even members of their own class were not immune from the attentions of these low buffoons, causing the hapless victims to demand that Fourth Class come to their aid. The temptation to leave them there was great, but discretion is, after all, the better part of valour, particularly for a member of Fourth Class and we would render assistance as required.

Breakfast was self serve, starting with cereals, followed by traditional hot breakfast fare. Fourth Class tended to take their whole breakfast to the table since there was seldom time for the luxury of leisurely returning to the meal queue after cereals were consumed.

Step one upon arrival in the Mess was to excuse oneself to the senior cadet at one's allocated table. This was generally done loud enough to be heard over the general cacophony, no mean feat in the environment of the cadets' mess.

"Excuse me please Sergeant Himmler!!"

The response to this request depended on the mood at the time of the senior cadets at the table. Invariably the request would have been deemed to be too loud or too soft, and one would be admonished accordingly before being directed to be seated.

Chairs, we quickly discovered, were for Fourth Class to sit six inches from and parallel to the back of, for Third Class to sit on, for Second Class to relax upon and to stop First Class from falling on the floor. Some Second Class went so far as to insert a table knife between the back of the chair and each Fourth Class's spine to ensure that the requisite separation was being maintained.

Being seated, however, did not constitute consent to eat one's breakfast. Trial by interrogation preceded sustenance.

"What's the news, Fourth Class?"

Each Fourth Class was required to repeat items from that morning's news for the benefit and edification of the senior classmen, and it was necessary to have five items prepared. Attendance at Defaulters Parade made listening to the news beforehand somewhat difficult, and the more adventurous among us would sometimes attempt to fabricate news items. Mythical five day bicycle races provided the perfect vehicle to produce spills and thrills as well as results, and one could always take a punt on a change of Government in Italy. But woe betide any Fourth Class who was discovered telling porkies.

If Sergeant Himmler felt so inclined, he might casually enquire exactly what it was that Fourth Class intended to do to amuse themselves for the remainder of the day. This simple request did not invite an equally casual response, and Fourth Class would be required to repeat the minutia of the days events from the weekly programme of events. It also helped if Fourth Class had taken the time to learn what the other

classes also had programmed for that day for in a busy First Class schedule there wasn't always time to waste reading programs, Routine Orders or the other 101 myriad bits of bumf that occupied the College's notice boards.

Just to ensure that lunch time conversation got off to a good start, Second Class might make some casual inquiry which would require Fourth Class to do a touch of research in the intervening period, on a topic often obscure but one on which the questioner was a particular expert. Second and First Class cadets had an amazing range of interests.

The College's hectic lifestyle and constant physical activities cultivated healthy appetites, but few Fourth Class had much enthusiasm for going to meals. Lunch was an unwelcome intrusion in the day, and lectures and military training both welcome diversions from Fourth Class Training, as bastardisation was officially known. Lunch was usually served by stewards, but there were many instances where Fourth Class cadets got no opportunity to actually consume their meal, and some would grab a quick snack to stuff into a briefcase to be eaten surreptitiously in the first post-lunch lecture.

Each table was set identically. On each in addition to a knife fork and spoon, there was a single set of salt and pepper shakers, a stainless steel container with two slices of bread per man, butter in a dish and a silver teapot of tea and one of coffee plus a jug of milk. Such is the unreliability of our memories that some distinctly remember that we had crisp, white linen napkins which were kept, neatly folded, in pigeon holes along one of the walls. Others believe that only paper serviettes were provided in a suitable holder, and that they were also useful for wrapping an illicit snack to stuff into a briefcase in lieu of a meal which had not been eaten.

Spreads for bread, usually cheese or lemon spread and always Vegemite were also provided. At night, there would be a tureen of soup. It was Fourth Class responsibility to divide the common consumables into equal portions.

The butter had been sliced from a pound slab by the stewards, and one Fourth Class would score the top of each table butter ration with a knife; one cut along the centre length and four across the breadth, making eight equal portions. These were known as the Army/Navy lines, a tradition inherited like some others from the US Military Academy at West Point, upon whose disciplinary system the Duntroon variant had been modelled. Other West Point traditions had also been adopted.

Milk was a little harder to so divide, but the senior classes took a close interest in the actual quantity of milk provided for each table.

"How's the cow?" one would chorus, requiring the nominated Fourth Class to respond;

"The cow she's fine, she walks, she talks, she's full of chalk. The lacteal juices of the female of the bovine species are prolific to the extent of 2.1376 cups, Mister Eichmann!"

Eichmann would then require the said Fourth Class to pour the milk from the jug and into cups to demonstrate that his assessment of the amount of milk at the table was correct, or not. Failure to predict the amount correctly might invite push ups or some other punishment. One Mess favourite was to require a Fourth Class cadet to circumnavigate the mess while simultaneously keeping his index finger pressed to the wall. This journey involved approaching each of those First Class cadets who

cautiously kept his back to the wall, excusing oneself and seeking permission to pass. It also invited further bastardisation at the hands of these twisted souls.

A more bizarre form of punishment consisted of pushing a pea about the floor with one's nose. Cadet legend had it that one of the more sadistic cadets had driven an earlier Fourth Class to the point of collapse by making him so push a pea from the mess all the way to the barrack blocks, supposedly in revenge for having been made to perform a similar task himself by the cadet's elder brother.

Even the consumption of a meal could be turned into a torture. Eating a square meal bore no relation to sustenance or nourishment. Sitting six inches from and parallel to the back of his chair and looking directly to his front, the unfortunate Fourth Class having been directed to eat a square meal would then be required to cut whatever portion of meat had been served, place it with vegetables on his fork and then raise the fork perfectly vertical until it was horizontally in line with his mouth. Fork and contents would be moved along that same horizontal line and be deposited in the mouth. Before chewing could commence, the fork had to be returned to the plate following the exact route it took on the way up. And so on until all the food on the plate had been consumed. The starving children in Biafra would not have appreciated food being left on Fourth Class plates, no matter how revolting or noxious it was.

Thus when all the cadets had been fed and the cooks announced that there were "Back-ups!" Fourth Class would be sent to the servery to collect a portion for the table. If it was edible, it would first be offered to the Senior Classes. If not, Fourth Class got to eat it all. I once remember Darryl Crunkhorn returning to the table with a large dinner plate piled high with boiled cabbage (the RMC cooks' version of boiled cabbage was to boil it excessively until all nourishment had been boiled away, and only bitter fibre remained.) Whoever it was whose table we sitting at made us eat the whole lot, insisting that we remain at the table until it was gone.

There was even a system whereby the allocation extra portions or back ups would be decided by playing for them in an attempt to introduce a little fairness into the process. The College's version of "rock-scissors-paper" was known as "junking-paw" and once the number of items to be competed for, and the number of cadets playing had been determined, the senior cadet would call out, "Three playing for two, japaw!" or "Two playing for one, japaw!" until a winner was decided; rock breaking scissors, scissors cutting paper, paper covering rock. An undecided result required an instant replay. The game required a quick hand, a quicker eye, and a quickly calculating mind.

This would normally be played very quickly, which advantaged the more experienced senior cadets. Since necessity is the mother of invention, Fourth Class quickly grasped the rudiments of this game of opportunity. The cry would more characteristically be something like "Eight playing for four japaw, four playing for two japaw, two playing for one, japaw!" hands flashing behind heads then to the front of the body in rapid succession as the slower usually junior class cadets were quickly eliminated.

Submarine meals were eaten upon the floor, achieved by simply removing the chair from its place. The meal remained in its usual place upon the table, and Fourth Class had to reach up from the floor and cut and pick up the food from the plate, sight unseen. The end result was that Fourth Class got more food in his hair and over his uniform than in his mouth. Such slovenly behaviour, not to mention the waste of good food, invariably brought a rebuke and punishment from the Senior Class.

Vegemite was a college institution, renowned for its aphrodisiacal properties and as a general tonic, particularly if consumed in massive quantities. It was known as “crotch”, or “gorilla’s armpit” and was prescribed by second class to be taken by the spoonful. A new jar was known as “virgin crotch.” Before it could be consumed, a small ritual was carried out to pierce the smooth surface, accompanied by a small cry as the knife penetrated down through the black paste, supposedly imitating the cry of a young maiden at the moment of deflowering.

It also seemed that the senior classes were pathologically incapable to track time, and would demand of Fourth Class, “What’s the time!”

“I am deeply embarrassed and greatly humiliated that the inner workings and hidden mechanisms of my chronometer are not in accordance with the celestial happenings of the sidereal day, but to the best of my ability the time is exactly 1236 and ten seconds!”

The morning parade and afternoon lectures meant breakfast and lunch at least were not prolonged affairs, with senior cadets vacating the mess to attend to their morning routine and to attend lectures. Not so with the evening meal, when only private study in one’s room beckoned.

Apart from the bathroom sessions which invariably preceded them and which are described elsewhere, evening meals were notable for the fact that we dressed formally for dinner, wearing summer mess kit in summer and mess, undress in winter.

Mess Undress was simply our dress patrol blues minus parade accoutrements, and therefore a very simple uniform to don. Summer mess kit required a self tied black bow tie, which was the cause of much consternation and strife.

In our first year as cadets, the college had not yet adopted the white Ascot style jacket which completes summer mess dress, so we simply wore blues trousers, white shirt and bow tie, a combination which the cadets christened “penguin dress.”

Not every cadet mastered the correct technique of tying a bow tie, but in the only positive benefit I ever received from the relationship with him, a Second Class cadet on my floor, taught me the technique. Consequently my skills were in much demand by senior classmen as well as my own class, and after I had managed the art of tying a bow tie, I was spared some of the more malevolent attentions of Senior classmen who required assistance, since even their own low behavioural standards would not allow them to stoop to biting the hand that tied their ties for them. It did not however totally stop them from having the odd nip.

Towards the end of the year and when the intensity had decreased somewhat, some Senior Class cadets on a Friday evening would hold a “reverse table” when Fourth Class were given the opportunity to extract a measure of revenge for the treatment that they had received during the week. This was not necessarily a universal practice and provided but momentary release from the otherwise relentless and harrowing experience of bastardisation .

It was not all one way, however. One Second Class on our floor became the unwitting victim of Fourth Class revenge. A wan and spindly youth, he was addicted to cigarettes and hot chocolate. Fourth Class were required to make brews on demand for First and Second Class, and this individual would stand and demand “Brew, Fourth Class!” whenever the desire took him.

We acquired some Laxettes, a chocolate flavoured laxative which we mixed into his hot brews. The more hot chocolate he would drink the sicker he would become until, unable to function, he would lose his appetite and fill himself full of drugs and potions to bring his condition under control.

It always gladdened our hearts to see him recover for the first usual sign that he was returning to the fullness of health was the demand, "Brew, Fourth Class!"

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