

The Soldier's Charter



THE SOLDIER'S CHARTER

Written by serving soldiers

edited by Chris Knight

Introduction

This document is, to our knowledge, the first of its kind to be written from within the armed forces. For this reason the facts contained in it may not be easy to verify. Unless readers have had recent service experience, they will have very little to compare it with—other than official army propaganda. We simply lay out here the facts as we believe them to be, giving our reasoned opinions as to the position of the ordinary soldier in the army today and what can be done about it. In this edition we are addressing ourselves firstly to the labour movement at large. A second, printed pocket edition and a series of leaflets are being produced for distribution among the ranks. Soldiers who do obtain this edition will find in it, we are sure, little that is either new or suprising, although we hope it will help crystallize into sharper form their general discontent.

The following pages were written by serving soldiers, with very little editing by the publishers. The basic material was a mass of notes and anecdotes written down from memory, much of which for reasons of space we have had to leave out. A separate document on soldiers' wives and children—the treatment of women in the army, education facilities for children etc—is being prepared. Almost everywhere we have kept to the words we were given, sometimes changing the person, always omitting details which might have led to identification and victimization of the authors, and occasionally reproducing passages in quotation marks in full.

We thought long and hard about "how far we should go". Some have advised us that it would be better to "keep politics out of it" and concentrate on questions of civil liberties alone. Our encounters with the soldiers themselves have convinced us that such an approach would be a mistake. The more "cautious" the labour movement is in discussing the question of the Army, the less likely is it to gain any real support from the ranks. To win respect, the labour movement must stand up for itself and show a determination to accomplish its aims. The mass of the Army will incline towards us when it becomes convinced that we are not merely grumbling and demonstrating but are fighting for power and have some chances of winning it.

In consultation with members of the Leeds Labour Party Young Socialists, this Labour Society and the Young Chartists nationally, the authors of this document, all of them young soldiers, have formed a "Soldiers' Trade Union Rights Movement". This will seek support from Labour organizations throughout the country and spearhead the growing movement within the army for civil liberties and the right to organize. The publication of this document today marks the first public appearance of this movement, although in their own way the founders have been taking action within the army for a period of several months. The "Citizen"—weekly organ of the Labour Party in Leeds—carried an article in its February 5 issue describing the circumstances under which we first came together.

To see this document in its wider context we can go back to July 1969—the date the Transport & General Workers' Union's National Government Officer, John Cousins, wrote to Denis Healey (then Labour Minister of Defence) requesting him to consider the possibility of allowing the Union to recruit members of the Forces. The reply (from Roy Hattersley on the Minister's behalf) was widely quoted in the Press at the time.

It confirmed Cousins' contention that .

"the law does not prohibit a Serviceman from joining a trade union providing he undertakes no obligation other than the payment of his subscription".

What value the soldier was supposed to see in this, one is not sure, although the letter continued :

"we encourage men with the appropriate qualifications to join craft unions before they leave the Services, in order to improve their chances of finding skilled civilian employment".

This arrangement was agreed with the T U C. Concerning the "radical change" proposed by John Cousins—full trade union membership and the establishment of a Whitley Council for Servicemen—the Minister could "hold out no prospect that it would be acceptable". It would

"seem to imply the recognition of the twin principles of collective bargaining and the right to withdraw labour...

...A Serviceman who withdrew his labour could be charged with failure to obey a lawful command. A group of men who took strike action might be charged with mutiny. This position is based partly on the Service Acts and partly on the powers of the Royal Prerogative".

As if the Service Acts could not be reviewed and the "powers of the Royal Prerogative" curbed by a party with the majority in Parliament ! The Labour Minister's reply illustrated perfectly the habit of submission and hypnosis of class-domination which—in our view as Labour Party members—have characterized our Party since its foundation. We have been afflicted by an abject fear of grasping independent power. So much courage had we last time we were "the Governing Party" that we scarcely dared breathe lest the ruling edifice might tremble, even citing the "Royal Prerogative" as an obstacle to the recruitment of soldiers into the trade unions—a step which would immeasurably strengthen our whole movement ! Who was elected to govern—the Labour Party, or the Crown and the Army chiefs ?

In fact, the Defence Minister's response to the T & G was a disgrace. Apart from Labour's elementary duty towards the defenceless soldiers themselves, is it seriously suggested that a socialist society can be brought into being with the armed forces in their present state—insulated from the people and forced blindly to obey their superiors ? How can the working-class take power without winning the soldiers to their side ?

It is not only a question of struggle for socialism. Even our

existence as a movement cannot be considered secure—particularly in view of Britain's political and social crisis today—as long as the whole armed power in the country is entirely controlled by an un-elected caste of officers whose prime loyalty is not to democracy or even to Parliament but specifically and solely to "the Crown". John Cousins declared (Times, 25/2/70) that "the unionization of the services would make the possibility of a military coup d'etat more remote". And he was right. The real danger of a "mutiny" today comes not from the ordinary soldiers who make up the mass of the Army but from the tiny military-bureaucratic clique who control them and who are linked by a thousand threads to the aristocracy and the property-owning class. The only guarantee for the labour movement against the sort of "blind obedience" of soldiers which leads to military coups and dictatorship is a powerful trade union movement in the Army. With soldiers' committees and the right to organize, the army ranks will be in a position to think for themselves. They could refuse to be used against our movement in, for example, a General Strike held to prevent an extreme right-wing regime from smashing democracy and trade-unionism in this country. In this context, the question of trade union rights for soldiers can be seen as more than simply a matter of Labour's duty to a long-neglected section of the working-class. It is also a matter of elementary self-interest in securing the future of our movement.

Of course, the argument that in an army the ranks must be prepared to obey orders is a strong one. But in fact, it is not one which the soldiers we have met are seriously questioning. It is simply a matter of who gives the orders and on what basis. Even with all officers elected by the ranks (an absolute precondition for a democratic army in a socialist society) the officers, once elected, would have the absolute right to command. The soldiers could have confidence in their leaders, they would understand the reasons for commands, and the question of strikes would not arise. It is the present army system which our soldier friends have lost confidence in. Give them a democratically-controlled army, a real army of the people, with its members participating in production, its officers elected by the ranks and its whole structure integrated with the democratic institutions of the labour movement—and they will back it and fight for it with everything they have.

In the meantime it should be realized—as this document shows—that ordinary soldiers have to put up with working conditions which no self-respecting shop-steward in industry would tolerate for a single day. It is the responsibility of our leaders in the Labour Party and trade unions to see that something is done about it. Until they do, we will act as seems necessary ourselves.

May Day, 1971

Chris Knight

STRUCTURE AND ORGANISATION.

The aim here is to show how the army operates, not, at this stage - to raise criticism.

IMPERIAL GENERAL STAFF.
(controlling the R.A.F., R.N. and army.)

ARMIES WITHIN THE ARMY.
(e.g. the former "8th army" of N. Africa; B.A.O.R.)

CORPS.
(the number of corps within an army varies.)

DIVISION.
(again, this varies: B.A.O.R. is the British corps and comprises 1 Divn., 2 Divn., + $\frac{1}{2}$ of 4 Divn.)

BRIGADE.
(approx. 3 per Div., + echelon of stores, medicals etc.)

REGIMENT/BATTALION.
(depending on whether Artillery, Infantry, Armour etc.)

BATTERY COMPANY SQUADRON
(av. of 4 per Regiment or Battalion).

TROOP
(3 per Battery, Company or Squadron).

SECTION
(mainly Infantry units; 2 per troop).

The above is a breakdown of the command units in the army; the chain of command as opposed to rank.

The private soldier is more directly controlled within the Company/Battery and the troops which make it up. The command which the Battalion or Regiment has over him is often remote, but by nature of the fact that the camp will be occupied by approximately 500 men, geographical nearness allows of some control.

Above Battalion/Regimental level there is NO connection with the common soldier; the units are entirely officer dominated and the soldiers operate the machinery (as clerks, drivers, etc.).

The potential power of the working class is thus at Company or Battery level. To try to form Brigade committees would be useless.

We now turn to the rank structure.*

*This is only a basic guide; some O.R.s' titles vary according to corps.

Appointments may also carry a title,

e.g. W.O.1 = R.S.M. (Regimental Sergeant-Major).

W.O.2 = B.S.M. (Battery Sergeant-Major).
or C.S.M. (Company Sergeant-Major).

THE RANK STRUCTURE.*

(a) OFFICERS.

| | | | | |
|--------------------|---|--------------------|---|-------------------|
| FIELD MARSHAL | } | General Officers | } | OFFICERS' MESS |
| GENERAL | | | | |
| LIEUTENANT-GENERAL | | | | |
| MAJOR-GENERAL | | | | |
| BRIGADIER | } | Staff Officers | | |
| COLONEL | | | | |
| LIEUTENANT-COLONEL | | | | |
| MAJOR | | | | |
| CAPTAIN | } | Field Officers. | | |
| LIEUTENANT | | | | |
| SECOND LIEUTENANT | | | | |

(b) OTHER RANKS.

| | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|-------------------|---|------------------|---|-----------------|
| WARRANT OFFICER (class 1) (W.O.1) | } | SERGEANT | } | WARRANT OFFICERS | } | SENIOR RANKS |
| WARRANT OFFICER (class 2) (W.O.2) | | MAJORS | | | | |
| STAFF SERGEANT | } | JUNIOR N.C.O.s | } | N.C.O.s | } | JUNIOR RANKS |
| SERGEANT | | | | | | |
| CORPORAL | | | | | | |
| LANCE CORPORAL | | | | | | |
| PRIVATE. | | | | | | |

N.B. Sergeants and above: SERGEANTS' MESS.

Corporals and Lance Corporals: J.N.C.O.s' MESS.

or

Corporals, Lance Corporals and Privates: JUNIOR RANKS' CLUB.

For every man at the front there are many more behind. We can class the army under these headings:

- (i) Support Arm, and
- (ii) Teeth Arm.

(i) Support Arm.

Comprising:

| | |
|------------|--|
| R.A.O.C. | Royal Army Ordinance Corps. (Stores.) |
| R.C.T. | Royal Corps of Transport. |
| R.A.M.C. | Royal Army Medical Corps. |
| R.A.D.C. | Royal Army Dental Corps. |
| R.A.E.C. | Royal Army Education Corps. |
| R.A.P.C. | Royal Army Pay Corps. |
| R.M.P. | Royal Military Police. |
| A.C.C. | Army Catering Corps. |
| R.E.M.E. | Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. |
| R.E. | Royal Engineers (with Teeth Arm.) |
| W.R.A.C. | Women's Royal Army Corps. |
| R.Sig. | Royal Signals. |
| Q.A.R.N.C. | Queen Alexandra's Royal Nursing Corps. |

DISCIPLINE

If any individual commits a serious offence, it would proceed along the various 'courts' in this way:

(i) Company Commander's Orders (Major).

The C.C. (Company Commander) is both judge and jury.
The accused's Troop Commander is present.
The accused, 'evidence', and escort are marched in by the Company Sergeant Major.

(ii) Commanding Officer's Orders (Lt. Colonel).

As above, only the C.O. is present, and the R.S.M. does the marching in.

At this point, 'a summary or "abstract of evidence" may be ordered. (i.e. all the evidence to be presented at the 'trial' must be committed to writing for further consideration.)

For the serious or moderately serious offence it would then go:

(iii) The D.C.M. (District Court Martial)

The President = Major

The Members = Two Lieutenants or Captains.

(These form the judge and jury).

The Defending Officer

The Prosecuting Officer

At this level the accused and escort are allowed to sit. The witnesses are called to give evidence.

OR a more serious case would go (instead) to

(iv) The G.C.M. (General Court Martial).

Here, the only difference from a D.C.M. is that:

The President = General Officer

Members = Five Majors or below.

Out of every 100 charges made:

70 are dealt with by the C.C.

29 are dealt with by the C.O.

1 is dealt with by the D.C.M.

(Our own estimate.) The G.C.M. is so rare as to be almost unheard of.

Crimes, too, can be split into two separate categories:

(a) Civil Offences; e.g. theft, rape, murder, embezzlement, speeding, drunken driving, etc.

These sorts of offences are usually dealt with by the C.O. or D.C.M. Here, people are either acquitted or found guilty, and justice is done to nearly the same extent as would be the case in a civilian Magistrates' Court. (The maximum sentence which a C.O. can 'award' is 28 days' detention and a heavy fine. The C.C. cannot give detention).

(b) Military Offences; e.g. insubordination, disobedience, failing to salute an officer, threatening a superior, and perhaps the most important is:

The other, more important part (at least from the point of view of war), is the

(ii) Teeth Arm.

(a) Infantry. (The Guards, Welsh Regiment, The King's Own, Royal Regiment of Fusiliers etc.)

This comprises all the old units with long histories and traditions. It is here that the problems discussed later have their worst consequences.

(b) Royal Artillery. (R.A.)

These regiments are numbered and titled with their weapons, e.g. 14 Field Regiment, R.A.; 39 Missile Regiment, R.A.

(c) Armoured Corps. This is the Royal Tank Regiment + all the old cavalry units, e.g. 17/21st Lancers; 5th Hussars.

There is a difference in the role, and consequently in the way of life, between the support and the teeth arms.

The Support Arm consists of units which, to a large extent, perform their normal functions both in peace time and war. The R.A.O.C. still provides stores for the R.C.T. to transport; the R.A.M.C. runs hospitals, and the R.E.M.E. has its vehicles to maintain.

This is not the case with the Teeth Arm. Its role is to fight, and so in peace time it is at its closest to its proper role when out on exercises.

When any unit is performing its normal role the relationship between officers and men is a working one, and therefore the differences are reduced to a scale near to that of the normal management/worker relationship in industry.

From this it can be seen that the army system is at its worst in the normal day to day life in a teeth arm unit. It is here that the support for and the strength of soldiers' committees will be.

There are also geographical differences in this; the situation is at its worst in the 'last outposts of the Empire' such as the far east and B.A.O.R.

Section 69 of the Army Act; "Conduct prejudicial to good order and military discipline."

These are offences which would not be considered as such in civilian life. The greatest number of these charges is dealt with by the C.C. or C.O. and the object is not to establish justice, but to maintain and enforce discipline.

We have never known such a case to be dismissed. The primary object of the C.C. or C.O. is always to 'back up' the individual who is bringing the charge. If a C.C. or C.O. does think that the charge brought up is unjust, then he may deal lightly with the offender, but he will never clear him. It is a widely held belief that to over-rule such a charge would be a vote of 'no confidence' in the superior bringing the charge.

The fundamental wrong here is that in civilian life the police and the judiciary are completely separate bodies, whereas in the army they are the same, i.e. the establishment. This means that whatever a soldier is told to do, that he must; to refuse to obey or not to comply exactly with the command or order is of course 'disobedience'. To argue is 'insubordination' and to fail to do it properly is 'conduct prejudicial to good order.....'

There are many ways in which discipline can be enforced without resorting to charging people. Private soldiers can be, and often are, victimised when the sergeant comes to detail men for fatigues; even in the 'modern army' roads have to be swept, dishes have to be washed, the cookhouse has to be scrubbed, waiters are needed for the officers' and sergeants' messes, dustbins have to be collected and emptied, fire-pickets and guards sentries have to be found. Many of these duties are unnecessary, but the army is under no pressure to be efficient and make the best of its manpower. Rotas for such unpleasant and unpopular jobs are often run, but there is no rule which is written down to this effect. Any soldier who refused to accept the duty, for whatever just cause there might be, would, strangely enough, find himself on all the dirty jobs, day after day. In theory, he could make a re-dress to his C.C. but any attempt to do so would only mean that he would be even further victimised. We have known hundreds of these cases but have never known of anyone attempting to make re-dress. The private soldier resigns himself to his position and shrugs—"you can't buck the system."

Even if the victimisation is not intentional, the power is in the hands of the senior ranks and officers. Power is so absolute over their men that they often operate in a high-handed manner without ever realising it.

Here is a typical example:

"A private soldier was given only one week's notice that he was to go away on a course for three weeks. Two weeks after he had returned from the course, he was told that he would be away somewhere else for a further six weeks. He eventually returned to the camp on a Friday, only to find that he was detailed for a duty which lasted for a week, and for which he was confined to camp. He didn't even think of protesting."

Here is another example, in which a protest was actually made:

"Three men were detailed for a duty which, since they had done a similar one only two weeks before, they complained about to the C.C. They were told that it was not a soldier's job to ask questions, but to do his duty. The next morning they accordingly reported for the duty — drunk. They were arrested, sentenced to 28 days' detention, and, immediately after their release, found

that they were on another 'dirty duty' beginning on the Monday."

The stereotyped picture of the loud-mouthed sergeant-major bawling "Yew bloody 'orrible shower' at the men is a very true one. Many sergeants and warrant officers address their men in this way, and the expression "Get a few BODIES to..." is both typical and common.

The annual fitness test is a ten mile march, which all army personnel are supposed to do. (Some, of course, do not...) We know of an incident in which a very long serving senior N.C.O. said light-heartedly to a senior officer, "Shall you be doing the march tomorrow, Sir?" The said officer did not look at the soldier, but said coldly " You've only just got that tape, ———, it would be a pity to lose it now." The soldier in question had just been promoted — after seventeen years!

A private was given some sort of a job to do and left to get on with it. The sergeant who had given him the job returned some time later and found that progress was not to his liking. After calling the man a 'useless spastic' he put him to cleaning out the toilets for the next three weeks. Examples such as this could be quoted ad infinitum.

Army policy is that "work of an unpleasant nature should be shared as evenly as possible" among the lowest ranks, though no law exists to ensure it. Even if it were to exist, it would not be put into practice, since the sergeants etc. would have their own idea as to what was 'fair'. The only way that any level of justice could be introduced into these cases is by soldiers' committees, which would be represented at all Orders and Courts Martial; right of appeal, and freedom of expression in the mass media; in other words, a strong trade union's protection is needed.

Often, well-meant changes in policy are never put into operation at 'shop-floor level'. This is because all rules are open to be interpreted as the individual wishes, and these people, as stated before, are always supported in their interpretations.

"Queen and country" still play a major part in the discipline of the army.

"I knew of an officer who ordered a married corporal to go on a five week course at twenty hours notice. The soldier's wife was new to B.A.O.R. and had only arrived a few days earlier. They had a private flat, some considerable way away, since there was no army quarter available. The soldier explained this to the officer, and said that he didn't want to go. He received a reply to the effect that " The Queen's always the first lady in a soldier's life; your wife will have to get used to that idea, just as mine has." Whenever he made remarks along the same lines those who heard him would smile to themselves. The officer was still living in a pre-war world."

"In the local army cinema, "The Queen" appears at the beginning of every performance. As the audience shuffles to its feet there is always a mutter of voices. One evening the muttering was shattered by the voice of a senior officer. He was standing to a bolt upright attention, and as he was doing so he had shouted "Stand still and shut up". The cinema was quite full and many men were there with their wives and families. The first reaction of the crowd was to stop talking instantly, which lasted for about three seconds, until their conscious minds realised what had happened. Then, while those in recognisable proximity of

the officer stayed quiet, those 'out of range' began to laugh and whistle. The overall result was that he made a complete fool of himself. Only those in fear of reprisal—i.e. those whom he could actually see—obeyed his orders. The remainder thought he was an idiot, and felt safe enough to say so."

Some entrances to buildings are reserved for officers only. The Other Ranks are supposed to use the less impressive "tradesmen's entrance" at the rear. Over a period of time, the lower ranks are apt to become careless of this rule so from time to time the R S M attacks the problem and clamps down heavily on offenders.

"I had been away from my unit for some weeks, and during my absence the R S M had had a purge on Doors. I was unaware of his latest efforts on the subject, and was unfortunate enough to bump into him, as it were, on my way out of an illegal door. Like many others, I had been using this door for a number of months without anyone taking offence. This time, I immediately guessed from his glassy expression that something was wrong, so I cheerfully said "Good morning, Sir!" He ranted and screamed for a while about my being a disgrace to the British Army, not fit to be wearing my rank etc., and asked me if I had been at the last mess meeting (held while I was away). I said no and explained why. He barked that that was no excuse (for not knowing!) and gave me four extra twenty-four hour duties."

The soldier concerned had, of course, no right of re-dress and to have refused to do the duties would have been inconceivable. At the merest hint of resistance he could have been stripped of his rank and made to suffer the accompanying substantial loss in pay. This again may be only a 'minor' incident, but it gives a good picture of the kind of class-system and grievances which ordinary soldiers have to put up with in the name of "discipline".

* * *

THE MESS SYSTEM

- (a) The Officers' Mess (all units).
- (b) The Sergeants' Mess (all units).
- (c) The J.N.C.O.'s Mess (about 70% of units outside U.K.)
- (d) The Soldiers' Canteen (all units).

N.B. All information will be based on a normal Teeth Arm unit of Regimental/Battalion strength, i.e. approximately:
35 OFFICERS,
60-70 W.O.'s and SGTS.,
100 J.N.C.O.'s,
400 PRIVATE SOLDIERS.

In groups (a) and (b), the members of the messes live in the mess if they are unmarried or separated (temporarily or permanently) from their wives. Thus they eat, sleep and base their social activities there.

As for the junior ranks, they sleep in the barrack blocks, eat in the central cookhouse, and base their social activities in (c) or (d). Group (c) is not a "legally constituted" mess as is the case with (a) and (b). The NAAFI canteen provides facilities for the junior ranks and (c) is usually a separate room inside the NAAFI building.

We will now examine each mess in turn.

-(a) The Officers' Mess. This is generally the largest and most impressive building in any camp, with its own gardens and well-kept flower beds, private tennis courts, and the atmosphere of a five-star hotel. The interior has the somewhat masculine "stately home" look, with ornately-framed portraits of distinguished officers, battle honours, and sparkling silver trophies bedecking the walls.

The ante-room is like the stereotyped ideal of a London club: polished wooden parquet floors, thick pile carpets, and an immaculate and luxurious bar; but grandest of all is the dining room. A huge mahogany table dominates the scene, and the elaborately-ornamented chair at its head is reserved for the Colonel.

Such a mess would have a soldier staff of about ten, in addition to some five civilians, who would be cooks, cleaners, barmen and waiters. The day to day running would be controlled by a senior sergeant. (It must be stressed that these soldiers do nothing else beyond their duties in the officers' mess. They are thus provided entirely free by the British taxpayer.)

Such surroundings are the setting for the most elegant and refined pre-Victorian parties and soirees for officers and their ladies.

When an officer is posted away from his regiment, the occasion is celebrated by a "dining out" of the individual concerned. This is a compulsory stag mess dinner for all officers; the dress is mess

uniform (military dinner jacket and trousers), medals and spurs.

After dinner, champagne gives way to stronger spirits, and the public school type of masculine "good clean fun" is encouraged. Rugger in the dining room, jousting on each others' backs with broom handles, sliding down staircases on upturned tables and throwing the youngest officer into the fishpond are to name but a few of the academic achievements of the inmates. Another pursuit which has grown in popularity is the Initiative Test, in which all the young officers have to go and fetch something from the camp—e.g. a soldier from the Guard, a Private's bed (at 2.00a.m.), or 'de-bag' another officer and fly his underwear from the unit flag-pole.

In the morning a private on fatigues is then ordered to return the toys to their normal positions. No disciplinary action is ever taken, as this is only "high spirits" which is good for morale. (Whose morale?.... you may well ask.)

(b) The Sergeants' and Warrant Officers' Mess.

This is another impressive building as a rule, but the tennis courts and neat gardens are absent. The genteel atmosphere of the officers' mess is replaced by a disciplinarian face. The focal point in this establishment is the bar, as opposed to the dining room in the previous case. In many ways it is a cheaper, nastier version of the officers' mess; the living-in members have their own rooms, as do those of the officers' mess, but the furnishings are generally poorer and there is no carpet on the floor. Here there are no "high spirits", but a reverence of God, Queen and Country.

The guardian and preserver of this morality is the R.S.M. (Regimental Sergeant-Major). All members of the mess are subject to his discipline. There is no feeling of social injustice here, as these are older men who have (usually) seen a fair number of years' service, and who (obviously) have accepted the disciplines and injustices of the sergeants' mess in particular and the army system in general. (All the others left years ago.)

The obedience exhibited by these men to mess rules is inconceivable to anyone outside the system. No-one would think of removing his jacket in the mess, or loosen his tie, regardless of the heat. Of course, if the R.S.M. gave the order to remove jackets, then all would immediately do so.

"A young sergeant in a striped shirt and flowery tie (but wearing a suit) went into the crowded bar of the mess one Saturday evening, and the R.S.M. shouted (always to be taken literally, this verb,) at him for all to hear: 'Get out of my mess, and don't come back till you're properly dressed.'"

The sergeants' mess is also manned by soldiers, though this time only about five are involved. Two or three civilians may also be employed. Casual labour in the form of fatigue men is used for cleaning toilets and washing dishes.

(c) The J.N.C.O.s' Mess.

As has already been said, this, if it exists at all, is not really a mess, but a bar-room in which potential sergeants may receive some experience and training in mess life. The eating and sleeping quarters of J.N.C.O.s are only very rarely separated from those of the private soldiers.

For this reason we shall deal with the junior ranks as a block, and this will be done by considering the headings of eating, sleeping,

and social activities, taking the latter first.

(a) "Social" activities. The NAAFI Canteen.

This is generally a room no bigger than the officers' mess dining room. All too often it is a place with no decoration (except for a portrait of The Queen, which is hung out of reach). Its furniture comprises chairs and tables; its job is to sell beer, sandwiches and pies to up to 500 men.

The staff behind the bar are all civilian employees of NAAFI. Strict opening and closing hours are therefore adhered to, and the place is usually cleared by the Orderly Sergeant:

"In BAOR, while spirits are cheap, there is a complete lack of other social facilities. When the private soldier can escape the discipline of the day he heads for these spartan surroundings with his friends. The establishment and its administrators do not respect him. Nor do they credit him with any intelligence—only the desire to be drunk. This of course is exactly what he does. I have never seen so many young men (18-24 years) be so incapably drunk as often as they can. Men who had never been drunk in their lives before are being carried out of the canteen night after night, after three months in BAOR. This is a place where women never go and fights are not uncommon."

(b) Eating: The Cookhouse.

This is a central building which serves three meals a day to up to 500 men. It is usually superficially clean and the walls, door, and window-frames are painted regularly. Yet beneath the hot plates and fixed furniture will often be (abroad especially) evidence of cockroaches and mice. The furnishings are plain tables 2 ft. 6 ins. square, and tubular metal chairs.

Food is usually plentiful but very poorly cooked, and served in the most unappetising combinations (mashed potato fried egg and beans, for example). At meal times the doors are kept locked up to the last minute, with the result that when they are opened an animal-like fight develops to reach the front of the queue and secure the best possible choice. (The better cuts of meat are in extremely short supply; consequently the goal of the majority is to reach the twenty or so chops/chicken legs etc, first. After that it's back to the egg and beans.)

The Orderly Sergeant is again in attendance to keep the men well-behaved. In many units NCOs stand at the entrance to the cookhouse to turn away people with dirty hands or cutlery.

In many cookhouses there are insufficient plates to go round and ten minutes after the start of the meal men walk among the tables trying to whip one away as its owner finishes with it.

There are no proper salt and pepper pots (unless the Brigadier is paying a visit), so large tins are put out on some tables which once again results in competition to get hold of them. Men take their own knife, fork, spoon and mug to meals, for the officers say that if they were provided with them in the cookhouse they would be stolen. (some units however do seem somehow to manage to do this....)

Bread is usually plentiful, but because of the policy by which the oldest stock is always used first, it is often speckled with green mould. The Orderly Officer in attendance asks somewhat

patronisingly for complaints at each meal, and though he may receive several, he rarely takes action on them.

The cookhouse is staffed by 10-15 army cooks and 3-4 civilians, plus about 4 fatigue men who wash dishes, clean floors, etc.

The animalistic behaviour at the average cookhouse is of course a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that the men behave as they are expected to behave, and then blamed for it.

When a senior officer from outside the regiment inspects the cookhouse (3-4 times a year), the picture is very different, and the impression is one of a well-run Lyons cafeteria. An

officer who asked the men what the food was like, could receive the answer: "Good today, sir, but you ought to come back tomorrow..."

(c) Sleeping. The Barrack Block.

This is the sleeping accommodation provided for Corporals, Lance-corporals, and Privates. In some cases it is a large room for 30-40 men; in others, 2-3 men. The average may be 6-8 per room. Each man has a steel-framed bed, bedding, and a locker (6'X3'X2'). In these barracks with their small rooms soldiers often have some of their own furnishings: carpets, radiograms, bookshelves, etc. They may be allowed to decorate their own rooms, as the "new image" presses the "homely" look.

Nevertheless, the old-style "Barrack-room inspection" has not gone. It is in special evidence just before the annual "Admin" (Administrative) inspection. Beds are made with ironed sheets and pillowcases, the top sheet folded down the same distance on all beds to within $\frac{1}{4}$ inch. Everything belonging to every soldier is laid out and "bulled up". (Polished to mirror-brightness, ironed, cleaned, scrubbed, whichever is applicable for each individual piece of kit.) PT vests and shirts, shirts, towels etc. are folded round sheets of A4 paper to ensure their immaculate appearance and uniform size. All socks and gloves are rolled in the same manner. The soldier is stood to attention by his bed while the officer and his entourage (up to 15 men) poke around at his kit and scatter it on the floor and tell him that the soles of his (private non-military) shoes require cleaning, or that if he must leave money in his bedside locker the coins should be in a little stack.

"An average pair of "best" boots is bulled (polished till they shine like patent leather), for about 20 man hours, yet in training I have seen inspecting officers throw them through the window as a mark of their dissatisfaction!"

For such large inspections everything in sight is painted—not that it needs painting, but just that by doing so it will look at its highest possible standard of cleanliness. This costs the tax-payer a small fortune.

An interesting—and amusing—example of the heights to which the idiocy of "bullshit" can reach, is provided by the old-guard-mounting parade. Although this has disappeared in many units it still lingers on in some, especially overseas. One in excess of the actual number of men required would be detailed to report for guard duty every night. Those men so detailed would then present themselves outside the guard room or on the parade square

for inspection. (All wearing their "best" uniform.) After the inspection, the man deemed smartest would then be excused duty and "let off", (hence the reason for detailing the extra man). The man so released was the "stick man".

This striving to be the stick man leads to the oddest behaviour —to the casual uninformed observer. A group of men will form a syndicate, and become the proud owners of a most immaculate uniform. They themselves keep it pressed, cleaned, polished and brushed, sewing down all the pockets to make them flat and smart, and bulling the boots until they are like mirrors. Then, each time a member of the syndicate was to appear for guard duty, he would don the suit and boots, lay himself carefully on a stretcher, (so that his trousers could not be uncreased) and be carried on it to the place of the inspection. This man usually got off the duty. Sometimes this kit would be hired out to non-members, if no-one of the syndicate needed it!

The idea behind the "stick man" was of course to encourage a high standard of turn-out.

Under the new pay system the men now pay for their accommodation and food out of their wages, yet they have no right to opt out of paying it unless they are married and accompanied by their wives. This means that if two men share a room and more men are posted to the unit, they may find that there are now four inhabitants of the same room. The rent deducted from their pay is still the same. We're sure that this would interest the Rent Tribunal!

It is interesting to note that the new barrack blocks which are being built in the U.K. are still of the same type, allotting 6-8 men to each room. It is difficult to explain the depressing lack of privacy which this causes to someone who has never experienced it.

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In some pockets where the system is not so rigidly enforced it is because of more liberal-minded officers. The framework of military law enables the rules to be interpreted as the individual commander sees fit, and so he may become a dictator in his own command.

A commander upset at unruly behaviour outside the cookhouse could order his company commanders to see that their men were formed up in three ranks and then marched to the cookhouse, have them all stand to attention outside and go in a file, one at a time, to receive their meal. There are many who would call this a "good idea".