



Army military police officers socialize in a Department of Energy club 11 October 1946 in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. (Photo by Ed Westcott, U.S. Department of Energy via Wikimedia Commons)

Mentorship Is a Mess



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The U.S. Army is missing a critical informal venue for leader development culture due to the demise of the officer and enlisted club systems. From a height of over one hundred clubs in the 1970s, Army service clubs have diminished to fewer than five

across the entirety of the force.¹ These clubs offered an essential element of prestige and exclusivity to officers and enlisted soldiers who were often underpaid compared to the civilian population. More than that however, they created a space where service traditions

and history were preserved, relationships built, and mentorship conducted. This space, away from the flagpole yet steeped in military tradition, provided a key conduit for leader development that is now absent in our military culture. This brief discussion will review the Army's mentorship deficit, the history of the club system, and its flaws and benefits, and then propose how a new system based on the British regimental mess might help revive the service club as a venue for informal mentorship, leader development, and unit culture.

The Army has a leader development problem. The 2016 *Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL)*, the latest publicly available, identified that only 57 percent of active-duty soldiers are receiving mentorship, a number that has been in a slow but steady decline since first assessed by CASAL.² Similarly, the "Leads Others" and "Develops Others" competencies of the Army leadership requirements model are below the desired threshold of 75 percent, presenting a medium chance of mission failure in their own right. In particular, "Develops Others" continues to be the absolute lowest-rated competency at 61 percent.³ The same report finds that only one-half of Army leaders take time to discuss how to improve performance or prepare for future assignments, and just one-third of respondents felt their unit placed a high priority on leader development. The report attributes this variously to lack of emphasis, time, or agreement on the nature of leader development. While not publicly available, the reader with access is encouraged to access the most recent CASAL findings to add another data point to the picture. Given this decline, it might seem that the Army should place more formal emphasis on the process than it does, but that is not the best way to build a culture of mentorship.

The Army does not doctrinally mandate any formal mentorship processes.⁴ Instead, Army Regulation 600-100, *Army Profession and Leadership Policy*, and Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, characterize the voluntary nature of mentoring relationships and give guidance on cultivating them.⁵ The voluntary nature of how Army doctrine treats mentorship reflects an understanding that mentorship is most effectively developed organically rather than mandated. A 2015 Naval War College study, for instance, found that participants judged formal

compulsory mentorship programs to be largely ineffective. Of the study participants, enlisted sailors rated the programs with a mean of 2.33 out of 5, while officers fared slightly better at 2.8, hardly a resounding success.⁶ This does not mean that the Army does not support mentorship; it actively encourages soldiers to seek out mentors and mentees among those with whom they have a strong relationship.⁷ The relationship aspect is key. Soldiers cannot be expected to capably seek or provide mentorship without a relationship of mutual respect and affinity. While those foundational qualities may begin to develop in formal work settings, it is the informal setting of the service club or mess where hierarchy can be flattened and affinity cemented into a close mentor-mentee relationship.

Before expounding further on the benefits of informal space for mentorship, however, it is worth touching briefly on the history of the service club, which begins in the U.S. Army at the outbreak of World War II. The Army had previously added morale programs such as the post exchange (PX) system, recreation centers, and gyms in 1903; these were centralized under the Army Morale Division in 1918. These were further consolidated with the Army Motion Picture Service and the Library Service in 1941 to create the "Special

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U.S. service members and civilians attend the annual JBLM Brewfest at the Club at McChord Field 20 February 2015 on Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

Services,” and the Special Services had responsibility for all Army morale functions by 1943.⁸ The budget of the Special Services grew with equal alacrity from \$38,459 in 1939 to over \$42 million by 1945.⁹ With the entry of the United States into World War II in December 1941, the Special Service mobilized with the soldiers and became expeditionary. By 1945, anywhere large concentrations of soldiers were gathered, there were service clubs, even in far-flung locations as Manila and Burma.¹⁰ By war’s end, with the transition toward an army of occupation, many soldiers and consequently many clubs remained spread around the world and run by Special Services as officer and enlisted clubs.

These clubs were not profit-making endeavors, and their programs were subsidized by other functions of the Special Services such as the PX system.¹¹ Eventually these two components would be separated, creating the Army and Air Force Exchange System to run the for-profit PX system and incorporating service clubs into the Army Morale Welfare and Recreation (MWR) Command. The clubs thrived

through the ’50s, ’60s, and ’70s, providing benefits and prestige to soldiers. They provided informal social spaces where soldiers could mingle and build close relationships across rank or unit lines. The very informality of the setting, tempered by a sense of place that remained historically and distinctly military, created an environment in which soldiers could develop relationships without any sense of favoritism or impropriety. A leader attended club functions, related to their subordinates as people, and in turn were socially ratified as legitimate beyond mere fiat. This collective social process of constructing leadership identity through contact with followers in informal settings is similarly a product of the regimental mess system in Commonwealth armies, as we shall explore shortly.¹² Unfortunately, as funding became an increasingly salient issue and soldier preferences waivered, the club system was on its way to obsolescence.

As the 1980s progressed, fewer soldiers were paying dues at the club. Simultaneously, the clubs became increasingly dependent on profitability as congressionally appropriated funds for their operation



Members of the United Kingdom's 250th Gurkha Signal Squadron hold a dinner night for their corporals 21 February 2020 in the Gurkha Room. The guest of honor was the regimental second in command who spoke about his leadership journey. (Photo courtesy of the 30th Signal Regiment, Queen's Gurkha Signals via X [formally known as Twitter])

dwindled.¹³ Competition with off-post establishments, base realignments and closings, and a general demographic shift toward family services over clubs also had contributing effects. By the time MWR Command was deactivated in 2011, and MWR fell under Installation Management Command, only seven clubs remained across the Army.¹⁴ Today, the officer and enlisted club system is absent from military life and the memory of most soldiers under the age of forty. Other nations, however, have maintained longstanding traditions of mess and club systems, which have existed in unbroken operation for centuries.

An example worth considering, both for its longevity and cultural similarity, is the British regimental mess system, which also operates in other Commonwealth nations sharing heritage with Britain. Historically, the British mess system began as a means for feeding officers during communal living in colonial and garrison settings, but it subsequently developed into the center of social life among officers of a given regiment.¹⁵ Officers, most of whom independently

wealthy, sought to lighten the burden of colonial duty by creating a social epicenter where they could commune.¹⁶ To realize this goal, mess dues were compulsorily collected from all officers.¹⁷ In return, meals, wine, and entertainment were provided. Once regimental depots were instituted from 1881 onward, regimental mess halls presented an ideal opportunity to develop a sense of place, serving as a repository for a regiment's history and artifacts.¹⁸ The mess found an expanded role in wartime as well, as those will secondary duties in the mess were expected to continue, using mess funds in theater to procure morale-boosting delicacies where able.¹⁹ The British mess system, however, was hierarchical internally and initially excluded enlisted ranks entirely except as personal servants. There were often complex and bewildering rules and hierarchies to the mess that hardly made it informal. There were, however, relaxations in dress, such as removing the belt and sword, to demonstrate that officers were off duty and to ease relations among soldiers of different ranks.²⁰ Overall, the greatest

strength of early incarnations of the British regimental system were creating a cultural repository for each regiment and beginning the move toward a more relaxed and informal off-duty social space.

The current mess system in Britain retains some hierarchy with messes for officers, enlisted personnel, and warrant officers held separately. However, other nations such as Australia have more egalitarian practices.²¹ The purpose of these egalitarian messes are more than social clubs, as one Australian officer writes:

Military messes contribute to fighting power 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 organizational characteristics that are fundamental to success—morale, integrity, values, and legitimacy.²²

Clearly, the mess serves as a key developmental venue for Commonwealth soldiers, one that the U.S. Army lacks since the demise of the club system. The mess as an institution has staying power beyond what the service club system had in the U.S. Army because it is grass roots organization at its core. The regimental mess is funded in part by dues from the unit, preserves the history and traditions of the unit, and serves as a center for social life in the unit. This differs considerably from the now defunct service club system in the U.S. Army, which was built to support a world war, survived due to governmental largess, and met its demise when required to turn a profit. Any attempted revival of the Army club system would be wise to take this to heart and root itself at the brigade level to leverage unit identity for support and funding. Despite these differences, the two systems provide an essentially similar function. They create an informal place in which history, materiality, and leadership intersect. As part of this function, they are central to “generating, transmitting, legitimizing, and undoing meanings associated with leadership.”²³ It is in this milieu, in an informal egalitarian setting, that leader development through mentorship thrives.

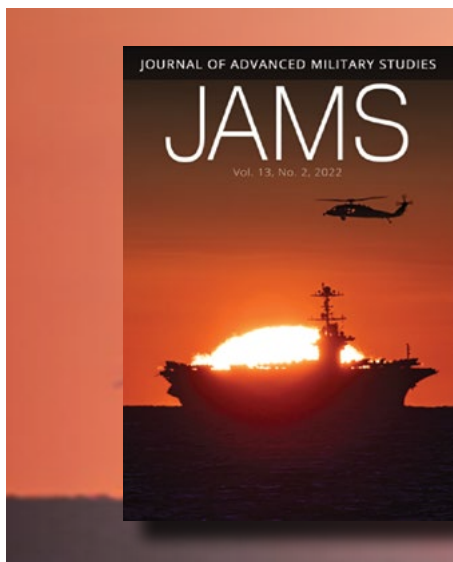
Returning to the CASAL, it cannot be overstated that “Develops Others,” at 61 percent and trending downward, is not enough.²⁴ We owe our soldiers better. Simultaneously, we face more tasks with comparatively

fewer time and resources than ever before. There are only so many hours in the day, and the CASAL shows that in the face of workplace requirements, mentorship is consistently deprioritized. A robust and lively mess system that ensures discussion of day-to-day work is taboo, while easing socialization up and down rank hierarchy is therefore the order of the day. Indeed, this is true outside the confines of the unit as well. Brig. Gen. R. J. Kentish, the inspiring and often comedic first commandant of the British Officer’s School at Aldershot during World War I, wrote about the value of the mess in building relationships further up the rank structure. He encouraged officers to “live well yourself, enjoy your food, and make all your young officers do likewise, and above all else see that you invite your General not once, but frequently.”²⁵ Such an environment is ideal for the type of informal mentorship seen as most effective by soldiers.²⁶ It fosters the underlying relationships necessary for leader development by linking it with socialization and intentionally isolating it from day-to-day discussions of specific work tasks. In this way, the mess system enjoyably creates fenced time for mentorship and presents opportunities for senior leader interaction without imposing added requirements.

In closing, the U.S. Army should implement a return of a service club system fashioned along the lines of the British regimental mess system. The U.S. Army today maintains thirty-one brigade combat teams, far fewer than the hundred or more officer clubs operated in the 1970s.²⁷ A brigade-based mess system would be far less costly than the club system to operate. Should that prove infeasible, any division- or installation-level mess system must create space within itself for individual units to invest. This system should place ownership in the hands of the unit in all particulars with no reliance on garrison or Installation Management Command. A brigade mess offers an opportunity to propagate unit culture and engage soldiers in the life of their cohort in an enjoyable way. Such a system offers the optimal combination of in-group culture, hierarchical flattening, and fenced time to enable genuine and lasting mentorship. Leader development through mentorship in informal and off-duty settings will result in more satisfied soldiers and more credible leaders, and it will build the next generation of Army leadership in an authentic, organic, and self-sustaining way. ■

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