



Company Command

Building Combat-Ready Teams



To: Company Commanders
From: Company Commanders

Are Customs and Courtesies Important in Today's Army?

Anyone have that senior NCO or officer in the unit who waxes nostalgic about the “old” Army complete with payday activities, Officers’ Club calls, and myriad other non-negotiable customs and courtesies? Thanks to the Long War, most of us have been a little busy for that stuff. But maybe—just maybe—there are some traditions and basic courtesies that we need to keep alive.

Please spend a few minutes thinking about the customs and courtesies that you think are still important, and why. Toss it out to your team for discussion and then share your perspective here. Given our influence over the next generation of officers, it is crucial that we be able to speak cogently on this topic and explain why some things are in fact important to our profession.

Megan Welch

Past CDR, 64th BSB

Although I’ve only been in the Army for eight years, I consider myself “old school.” My first duty station was First Armored Division Artillery in Baumholder, Germany. We did not deploy during the three years I was there, so as a young lieutenant I was raised on St. Barbara’s Balls, beer calls, OPDs [officer professional development events], coining at bars, etc. Events like these may seem frivolous, but they weren’t. The social events brought us together, creating a cohesive unit. Salutes, walking to the left of more senior officers and courtesies of the day are just simple signs of respect. Knowing and demonstrating these courtesies indicates that you have discipline and acknowledge the Army way of life. Traditions, customs and courtesies make for a stronger, cohesive Army. I miss the first few years of my career when I truly felt like I was part of an extended family.

Michael Shepard

Current CDR, HHC, 22d CM BN (TE)

I’ve been cautioning my soldiers in recent months about what to expect with the shift in focus from an expeditionary to a garrison force, and I’ve been encouraging behavior consistent with how the Army was when I joined—you always salute with the motto or greeting of the day (and return it as a senior officer), walk on the left side of superiors, enter the vehicle before the senior person and exit after, attend and be involved in military ceremonies and events,

etc. This is how I was raised—even in the Reserves—and these are the standards I try to enforce with my Soldiers now on active duty.

The difficulty is in explaining why customs and courtesies are necessary. Many NCOs have grown up in an Army focused almost exclusively on combat operations. The only metric that has been consistently and widely used over the last number of years is their effectiveness on combat deployments. Soldiering customs and courtesies have taken a backseat to just surviving combat.

Tom Morel

Past CDR, HHD, 411th BSB

When I was a young NCO, I hated the change-of-command ceremonies I had to march in. I couldn’t believe we “wasted” so much of a Soldier’s time doing that stuff. In my years of service, I’ve seen many things change: green fatigues to BDUs [battle dress uniforms] to ACUs [Army combat uniforms]; PT [physical training] banana suits to half-decent ones; steel pots to ACHs [advanced combat helmets]; C-rats [type “C” rations] to MREs [meals ready to eat]; patrol cap to beret ... to patrol cap. However, what have not changed are our customs and courtesies. We still have the “Adjutant’s walk” during changes of command. We still pass the guidon. We still have cadence calling in formation. We still play “Taps” at military funerals. These are things I hope never go away. I look upon our customs and courtesies as being family values, and much like my own family’s values, I’d be hard-pressed to change any of them.



CPT Michael Schmidt (left), shown here with his company executive officer, 1LT Jeff O'Dell, at Camp Lybert in Nuristan Province, Afghanistan, had little opportunity to train military customs and courtesies there but agrees that they "are a key facet to the profession."

Alicia Chapman

Current CDR, HHD, 114th Signal BN

My unit is composed of military, DA [Department of the Army] civilians and contractors. As the company commander, I have the task of getting these three entities with three "different" sets of rules to work together as a cohesive unit. This is no small task and it definitely isn't easy, but it is a problem I have to work through. How do I enforce a single standard for my unit when some of those standards cannot apply to the contractors or DA civilians? It can quickly turn into a game of "us versus them," which is not healthy for the organization.

Michael Schmidt

Past CDR, C/3-71 CAV

Once, when I was a lieutenant, I was walking on the right-hand side of a more senior officer. He grabbed me by the shoulders and moved me to his left. He didn't say a word, and I laughed it off. (I knew better; it had slipped my mind.) I've seen other examples where a group of officers coming out of a building were walking and talking, juniors walking to the right. The senior saw this and assumed the position on

Now-MAJ Roman Izzo (left) supports military customs and courtesies that build the team, community, family and officer corps because "officership is more than just a job."



the right without saying a word. The awkward looks on the juniors' faces showed that they understood what just occurred and would likely be more aware next time. I agree that C&Cs [customs and courtesies] are a key facet to the profession, but I also think it's important that we think about the manner in which we correct them.

Roman Izzo

Past CDR, C/1-66 AR and HHT/1-10 CAV

Officer's Call (or Stable Call) is a team building event. Keep it.

Walking to the left of a senior officer is more than a courtesy. It enables Soldiers to look at a group of people and immediately identify the senior person and determine whether or not a salute is required. Keep it.

Calling a building to attention instills discipline. Despite the fact that we are

a positive-leadership Army, it's imperative to maintain the respect for command that sets the conditions for instant obedience on the battlefield. Keep it.

Attending chain-of-command receptions builds the team, community, family and officer corps. Visiting the brigade commander's house on New Year's Day is the same. Hail and Farewells are the same. Military balls are the same. Cup and Flower Fund is the same. Officership is more than just a job. Keep them all.

Payday activities is a uniform inspection followed by an opportunity to go pay all your bills after getting your paycheck. Call it what it is: a uniform inspection and half day of work. Electronic fund transfer negates the need. Lose it.

Guidance from FM 7-21.13 *The Soldier's Guide: The Complete Guide to U.S. Army Traditions, Training, Duties, and Responsibilities.*

Many Army customs complement procedures required by military courtesy, while others add to the graciousness of garrison life. The breach of some Army customs merely brands the offender as ignorant, careless, or ill bred. Violations of other Army customs, however, will bring official censure or disciplinary action. The customs of the Army are its common law. These are a few:

- Never criticize the Army or a leader in public.
- Never go “over the heads” of superiors—don’t jump the chain of command.
- Never offer excuses.
- Never “wear” a superior’s rank by saying something

like, “the first sergeant wants this done now,” when in fact the first sergeant said no such thing. Speak with your own voice.

- Never turn and walk away to avoid giving the hand salute.
- Never run indoors or pretend you don’t hear (while driving, for example) to avoid standing reveille or retreat.
- Never appear in uniform while under the influence of alcohol.
- If you don’t know the answer to a superior’s question, you will never go wrong with the response, “I don’t know, sir, but I’ll find out.”

Stacy Thomas Lively Past CDR, HHT/3-73 CAV

Payday activities with in-ranks uniform inspection is a must. It develops not only the Soldiers but also the NCOs and officers who do the inspections. It ensures that uniforms that aren’t worn often are still kept in good repair and that the Soldiers know what proper wear and appearance mean. When I served as a platoon leader in the mid-1990s, the BN CDR [battalion commander] conducted an in-ranks inspection of the officers in his charge prior to the companies conducting theirs. I stood next to my company commander during one of these inspections, and it was definitely time for him to upgrade his Class “As” to a larger size. He hadn’t seemed to be concerned much about this until he was inspected by the BN CDR.

Another time, after an OIF [Operation Iraqi Freedom] deployment, the command held an inspection followed by an awards ceremony. A young Soldier who had a weight problem before the deployment came home without the weight. His Class “A” uniform no longer fit him properly. The NCOs had conducted what they called a “hangar inspection” ahead of time and said he was fine. On the day of the ceremony, when he actually wore the uniform, he didn’t look so fine. Regular in-ranks inspections are important to maintaining good order and discipline, and payday activities seem to be an adequate opportunity to conduct these inspections.

Joyce Loudon

Future commander, MP

One of the new BN CDRs in another unit here has already told his staff that he’s “old school” and to expect more officer calls. I’m a believer in those for team building and for providing an opportunity to approach our seniors in a more relaxed setting. Even in Afghanistan, cigar night was a great chance to catch some of the senior leadership in a more approachable mood, to ask questions, to get professionally developed—to ask what they’d heard about the incoming chains of command, how they chose a functional area, what being a FAO [foreign area officer] was really

like, and to receive their guidance on future assignments, career progression, NCO management, etc.

Eric Balough

Past CDR, A & HHC/1-16 IN

Remember, as Army officers we are considered members of a profession. We have certain membership requirements, required types of education, standards of conduct, and an internal method for discipline and development. Showing proper courtesy to other members of our profession does not necessarily mean that you are a “good soldier” any more than sometimes failing to observe them means that you are a “bad soldier.” However, adherence to customs and courtesies is an indicator of one’s professionalism.

I had a 2LT who came to my company fresh out of his basic course, and the first time I met him was in the battalion headquarters [BN HQ]. He introduced himself while slouching in his chair and neglected to use the word *sir* during our brief conversation. Now look, I am not a huge stickler on these sorts of things when it comes to folks that have been around for awhile. But this particular display was in the BN HQ with Soldiers waiting for their Soldier-of-the-Quarter board! What kind of example does that set when an officer is simply too lazy to say “sir”? Fast forward a few weeks. This same officer had received several counselings and had accompanied me on a few late-night, weekend barracks checks because he’d had some difficulty with the idea that he had to show up in the morning for PT formation. He’d earned his reputation within the battalion and the first indicator had been something as simple as rendering basic courtesies.

David Boyd

Current CDR, 465th EN CO, 926th EN BN

I think it would be helpful in this discussion to evaluate the purpose of customs and courtesies. I see many comments here that imply that without customs the military would not function, that the only reason the military works is that a thin red line of weary customs regulators is on the watch. I also see comments that suggest that after-duties

mandatory social events are a must in every unit, or that formations and reviews are a *good* waste of Soldiers' time because they build a respect for military life. I think these are a little off target.

Customs and courtesies are a way of rapidly assimilating a group of people into a new culture. We have an Army composed of all backgrounds, nationalities, races, creeds, etc. But an army composed of individuals with different "languages," different ways of thinking and doing ... in other words, individuals having different cultures, cannot function effectively. All good armies of the past have assimilated new Soldiers into a new military culture, and a big part of that culture is cultivated through customs and courtesies. The only difference between rabble and an army is training. Drill and ceremony train the units; customs and courtesies train the individuals.

Customs and courtesies are important, but we need to keep their intent and purpose—not necessarily their form. It is easy to get caught up on the *tactics* of customs and courtesies and lose sight of the *strategy*. If you insist on after-hours training just because it is a custom that you are familiar with from the "old Army," that is probably a mistake. If your intent is to instill team spirit among the officers, after-hours "forced fun" events aren't the only way to do that. A weekly officers-only physical training or sporting event would accomplish the same thing and not require officers to miss valuable family time in the evenings. The custom may be different from old Army, but the intent will be met.

We have a veteran force with a decade of service in combat zones. We have a very experienced and practical military that is very competent in combined operations and in the tactics and logistics of our age. We should be proud of that and adapt and develop customs and courtesies that are effective in preparing new recruits, new sergeants, and new officers to join us in this profession and in this fight. Our customs and courtesies need to reflect a focus on professionalism and discipline, but the bottom line must always be effective Soldiering over pomp and circumstance.

Jonathan Holm

Current CDR, A/3-16 FA and HHC/2-8 IN

I think military customs and courtesies are a must as long as they are done properly. They contribute to that all-important feeling that what we do

in the Army is more than just a job—it is a calling, a way of life, even if it's one you choose to live for only a few years.

Patron saint balls are a must-do. I will never forget the day my BN CDR hung that medallion around my neck. If you've earned it, it means a lot; it especially means a lot to the NCOs. Payday Activities are a practical custom that help build that feeling of "uniqueness" that sets the Army apart from civilian life. The practical side is that it's a good day to catch up on counseling, review/update personnel records, inspect ASUs [Army service uniform] and knock out other admin ankle biters. Another aspect of Payday Activities is that the Soldier who stands in formation and looks at his squad leader and platoon sergeant in ASUs also looks at those combat badges, skill badges, ribbons and medals and says to himself, "I want to be that guy." Having Soldiers put on their ASUs every once in a while and show off their flair isn't a bad thing. As for receptions, it means a lot when I get a good turnout at the reception after a change-of-command ceremony or promotion ceremony. It's nice when other people acknowledge that a CoC [change-of-command] or promotion is a huge day for you and your family. It also stinks to have to pack up a ton of food at the end of the day because everyone was too busy to come eat some of the free food that my wife prepared. I'm sure I'm not the only one who feels this way.

We just need to be smart about how we conduct our C&C activities. For an Officer's Call, if you start it at 1300 and are done by COB on a Friday, then it's a great way to end the week (and for the brotherhood of single lieutenants, a great way to start off the weekend). If you start it at 1800, however, don't be surprised when everyone looks ticked off and is out the door as soon as the commander is done talking. For a military ball, if you take the time to do it right, it's something people will talk about for months. Have an emcee, have a grog ceremony, honor our fallen com-



CPT Jonathan Holm enjoys a laugh with his soldiers at their recent combat-patch ceremony in Afghanistan. He believes that military customs "remind you that you are a part of something bigger than yourself."



CPT Brandon Soltwisch relinquishes his company's guidon to his battalion commander, LTC Lance Moore, at a change-of-command ceremony at Fort Bliss, Texas. Soltwisch says that "all customs and courtesies link us to our history and provide a sense of purpose and solidarity as soldiers."

to be shaped by people other than professional Soldiers.

At the company-command level, it comes down to communicating the importance of these traditions through leader professional development, example, and ensuring that Soldiers are receiving proper instruction as a part of Sergeant's Time Training. It's been a long time since I've seen formations practicing D&C or Soldiers studying unit history for anything other than a board. Maybe with dwell time increasing, we can finally find the time to get after this.

rades, talk about the history of the unit, etc. All that being said, let people leave work early that day to pick up their dates and, if you can't do it on a Friday, have a late work call the next day.

For me, the bottom line is that customs and courtesies are important. The courtesies are important because they show respect to someone who has probably earned it through multiple deployments, countless sacrifices and probably a few tough, thankless jobs. The customs are important because they remind you that you are a part of something bigger than yourself and help you take a moment to step back and realize that you are proud to be a paratrooper/Redleg/leader/Soldier.

Brandon Soltwisch

Past CDR, D & HHC/1-77 AR

Bottom line: Customs and courtesies are what separate us from the civilian world (and less professional armies around the world, by the way). They are important because they help to define the very essence of our profession by shaping the expected behaviors of those who choose to join us in military service. They are also one of the major reasons that our "customer"—the U.S. civilian—holds the military in such high regard.

Some customs—such as saluting and D&C [drill and ceremony]—instill basic discipline. Others are designed to build *esprit de corps* and camaraderie in fighting units. All customs and courtesies link us to our history and provide a sense of purpose and solidarity as Soldiers. Maybe some stuff needs to be "modernized," but failing to carry on customs and courtesies is a recipe for allowing our profession

Big thanks to Tom Handy, John Hollein, Mike Schmidt, and Tony Burgess for starting this important conversation. If you want to engage in more conversations like this to become a more effective leader and to advance the practice of company-level leadership in the Army, we invite you to join us at <http://CC.army.mil>. Access is limited to currently commissioned officers who are past, present, or future company-level commanders.