



Capt. Ken Rigoulot, USNR (retired), and Leslie Rigoulot speak with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullens at the Dallas Military Charity Ball.

Military Formal Fun and Faux Pas

By Leslie Rigoulot

Everyone in the military is subjected to the military ball. It can either be a blast or a minefield depending on how prepared you are. There are three basic military formal functions – Dining-In, Dining-Out, and the Military Ball.

Dining-In is for military members only and tends to allow for bonding. It may be referred in the Army as a Regimental Dinner or in the Marine Corps as Mess Night. Dining-Out includes spouses and is designed to be more inclusive. The purpose of both is to show how tradition and ceremony are part of military life and echo the victory dinners of past militaries.

The Dallas Military Ball is an example of a community and charity event. Civilians, retirees, currently serving and especially defense contractors attend to raise money for military charities and to reaffirm the US military.

What to Wear

The service member has it easy. She or he knows exactly what to wear – their uniform is dictated. For everyone else, this is a formal event. Knee-length or longer dresses are expected for ladies and tuxes for gents. No, you can't wear khakis and a tie. In a world of casual workplaces, this is the military.

Ask around to find out if others are wearing cocktail dresses or if your Wing, Squadron or Unit tends towards full-on formals. If you have a wives' club, this would be a good question to ask them. Then check the local consignment shops for dresses.

"The advantage of being transferred every three years is that you can recycle formals each time you transfer," says Kim Deleeuw, wife of former Air Force Captain John Deleeuw.

Cocktail Party and Seating

This isn't a concert. Don't try crashing the VIP Cocktail party. The security is tighter than Paris Hilton's sweaters. If your name isn't on the VIP list, you aren't getting in. So check in for assigned seating, find out what table you are seated at and figure out where that table is. Circulate during the cocktail hour but getting drunk before your Commanding Officer does isn't good form.

While these are social events, this is a chance for service-men and women to shine and show what a great team they make as husband and wife. Just like the corporate Christmas party, this is the time to show how much you would fit in with the upper ranks.

Receiving Lines aren't just for Weddings

Whether you are officer or enlisted, you can run but you can't hide from the etiquette of these events. Just like a wedding, these events have receiving lines. The idea is to introduce you to your host and hostess.

These can really be useful at Dining Outs when spouses might not be sure who the Commanding Officer and Executive Officer are. The object of the receiving line is quick introductions, not protracted conversation. Don't make snarky remarks about the woman wearing what looks like a prom dress unless you are sure you aren't talking to her spouse.

Even then, don't make snarky remarks because this just isn't the time or place for them even if Sandy Van Dessel did make the Spring Ball in Brunswick, Maine totally wicked fun by doing just that.

Flags of our Fathers

Posting of the colors is customary and every service member will remain at attention. Those not in uniform may either put their hand over their heart or simply face the flags.

If you haven't already turned off your cell phone, do it before the posting of the colors.

No one wants to hear your Hot N Cold ring tone during this impressive display. An Army/Air Force/ Navy/ Marine/ Coastguard band may be available to play the National Anthem or it may be a recording. "Play Ball!" is never, ever inserted at the end unless you simply want to end your career.

The table no one sits at

The POW/MIA table is set in the midst of the room as a reminder of those who are not present. At some events, the symbolism of candle, rose, salt and lemon may be explained. Even if they aren't, be mindful of those Prisoners of War and Missing In Action.

The Actual Dinner

Silverware isn't too intimidating if you start from the outside and work your way in. But the main thing about the dinner is don't start eating until everyone else does.

At some dinners, the salad may already be on the table before you are seated but that doesn't mean you get to dig in just yet. Toasts will be offered and a prayer may be said before everyone eats.

Be prepared to stand for toasts, which will start with the Commander in Chief and can continue for some time. "Here, here" is the appropriate response to each toast but don't drain your wine goblet with each toast or making a fool of yourself can become inevitable.

"But that is what makes these formal dinners fun," said Michelle Krayner, of Arlington, Texas. As the wife of a senior officer, she can afford to have fun.

"We brought water pistols one year," said the wife of Captain Rich Raherman, USNR, "but that was back when the Navy was more fun."

Then dinner arrives. At most military events you should be aware that dinner rolls are seen as ammunition. Graduates of the Naval Academy and Naval Aviators are particularly prone to launching dinner roll wars with other tables.

There was a New Mexico Air National Guard unit that was banned from the Officers' Club after a particularly aggressive dinner roll battle at a Dining In decades ago. Do not be the first

one to launch one of these attacks.

If you have a fun loving senior officer who starts something, that is fine. Most ladies in expensive gowns are hoping to avoid these alcohol-fueled spectacles of days gone by but no matter what, don't butter the rolls before launching.

Mr. Vice and the Grog Bowl

Dining In/Out usually have someone who is in charge of the event called Mr. Vice. He/ She gives the Rules of the Mess and introduces the Grog Bowl, a rare concoction of undetermined punch ingredients that might include Tabasco or other hot sauces.

"They usually threw a chunk of dry ice on top and would wheel in this smoking concoction," said Air Force Captain John Deleeuw. "You'd be watching your fellow officers all night looking for those little uniform infractions. Once Mr. Vice introduced the Grog Bowl, you'd ask Mr. Vice for permission to speak and point out that according to Air Force regulations black socks were to be worn and in fact your fellow captain was wearing Navy blue. Everyone would be indignant and rap the table with their spoons until Mr. Vice would sentence the guilty party to drink from the Grog Bowl."

Subjecting family members to the Grog Bowl can also be enticing.

"At a recent ROTC dinner, I sentenced my son to drinking from the Grog Bowl because he brought me, his dad, instead of finding a date," said former Air Force Major Bob Wheelock. The Air Force Academy grad has many fond memories of sending fellow pilots to the bowl.

Guest Speakers aren't always boring

The guest speaker can range from a local author to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Admiral Mike Mullens, the current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is an engaging and affable sort. He spoke at the 2009 Dallas Military Charity Ball and held everyone's attention – especially when he announced that President Obama had asked him to remain as the Chairman and he had accepted. It isn't often that ball attendees are privy to that sort of news.

When General Shinseki spoke at the Dallas Military Ball prior to the invasion of Iraq, his brilliance was dazzling and gave insight into what it takes to be the Army Chief of Staff. The local talk show host or author generally has an agenda and that can make for an interesting ten minutes too.

Smoking Lamp

One tradition that has gone is that of the smoking lamp. Back in the day, a lamp was lit to indicate that it was now acceptable to bring out cigars and cigarettes to smoke. With a more health-conscious military, it is never acceptable to smoke indoors.

Dancing the Night Away

At last, the dance begins. Everyone has been, for the most part, on their best behavior.

Now, they get to cut loose. When the Mess Dress uniform jackets come off, the fun can really start. After the CO/XO leave, things tend to lighten up a bit. But this is not the end of the evening. After-parties are now abounding so that even when the General leaves, there may be more to the evening. Just remember that the General may be the one leading the charge to the after-party. 