

## **Roll Call, a unique RMC Club tradition**

by H3550 Murray Johnston

No where except during RMC Club dinners do you see the tradition of having members stand up in succession and calling out their college numbers. This is our Club's tradition of Roll Call. It is unique and, if done well, forms a part of Club dinners that every one enjoys.

Over the past several years, however, I have observed several different ways of conducting a Roll Call. Sometimes changes are intentionally made to improve it or to emphasize certain things. Sometimes variations happen because of a difference of opinion on to how to conduct one. I suspect that it has become a tradition, the origins and purpose of which most Ex-cadets are unaware. And therein lies the danger of it being discarded and lost. Do we want that? Probably not. After all it is our unique tradition.

My search for the origins and purpose of RMC Club Roll Calls resulted in one reference, a sentence in the *Old Brigade Booklet 1990*, "The host conducts Roll Call commencing with the OLDEST and ending with the CWC."

However, "Roll Call, stand by your doors" at 2200 hours was a daily ritual at RMC in the years just before World War. All cadets in the dormitories were required to stand-by their room doors as the Battalion Orderly Corporal or Sergeant moved down the hallways in succession of companies taking the names of those not standing-by their rooms.

The practice of calling the roll was a part of army life a century ago. It was likely a part of life at RMC too in its early days. Soldiers were paraded and their names were called out in succession as listed on the unit's nominal roll. Those present responded when their name was called. After the roll had been called those in charge had an accurate count of exactly who was present and, most importantly, who was absent.

This was particularly important after a battle because it revealed who had been lost in battle - killed, hospitalized or taken prisoner. The names of those missing would have evoked strong emotions of loss and sacrifice to home and country. These same emotions were likely reflected in Club Roll Calls at dinners in the immediate post-war years when many of the numbers not called out would have been those whose names were engraved on the Arch.

Those names plus the names of those attending the dinners, i.e. the Roll Call, can be looked upon as symbolizing the record of sacrifice and faithful service to Canada by the "long line of cadets" who have passed through the Canadian Military Colleges. It is this record that gives RMC its value to the nation, a point strongly made by RMC's Commandant, E6107 Brigadier-General Jocelyn Lacroix, at the Ottawa Branch's annual dinner November 2005. In that sense Roll Call is indeed a very worthy tradition.

In the 1960s, when I first started attending Club annual dinners, Roll Call was conducted very simply in sequential order from the lowest college number to the highest. Some time later Ex-cadets began to be asked to rise by class and call their numbers in sequence within classes. This arrangement was needed because classes had become larger and it had become difficult for class members, while at table, to sort out among themselves the sequence of their numbers. It had also become difficult for those conducting the Roll Call to keep the calling of numbers in sequence and without gaps.

A decade ago Roll Call had become locked into being conducted by classes. One cannot escape the observation that the original convenience of conducting Roll Call by classes had become *de rigueur* and, as a result, Roll Call's focus on the "long line of cadets" shifted to which class had the largest representation at the function.

We had three Colleges of entry for nearly forty years and the closure of two of them in the mid-1990s saddened all of us. So in 2005, as an initiative to remember our former colleges, Roll Call at the Old Brigade dinner was conducted by classes and within each class by College of entry. Roll Call's focus was shifted further to College of entry.

In looking to the future, another point to keep in mind relates to the changing nature of the Canadian Military Colleges. Until the last thirty or so years the student body comprised only cadets who were enrolled in residential under-graduate programs. Now RMC has other programs and its student body includes non-cadet and non-residential students. All non-cadet graduates of the Colleges are eligible for Club membership. In addition, the Club's Honorary, Associate and Honorary Life members include non-ex-cadets of whom some are not associated with a specific class. Hence there are many types of College numbers.

The question is, "Is it now too difficult and complicated to organize a Roll Call for RMC Club functions?" It may be so for large Reunion Weekend functions except for conducting a Roll Call for those celebrating entry 60 years or more. It is also probably doable for Branch dinners and certain functions at the College such as the Graduating Class's final dinner and smaller dinners like the annual Mechanical-Aeronautical Engineering dinner.

Roll Call at RMC Club functions has always inspired me to think for a moment about classmates and others from the "long line of cadets" who have passed through the Canadian Military Colleges and who are no longer with us. Is that not a tradition worth keeping? What do you think?