

Ranking the Rank and File

By

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Introduction

Once a year in every infantry battalion in Canada, the officers and Sergeant Majors meet and rank every member of the battalion in order of “merit” during the annual battalion Merit Board. This battalion Merit Board is preceded by similar Merit Boards at the company level. While conducting fieldwork with a Canadian infantry battalion, I was offered an unprecedented opportunity to observe and tape record one of these company Merit Boards.¹ The Merit Board that I observed was an agonistic process, with officers arguing for and justifying their opinion as to the appropriate place for each soldier on the Merit List that the Board produced. The 108 page transcript of the proceedings which I produced shortly afterwards provides an invaluable window into how decisions about soldiers’ relative competence are made at the ground level in the infantry. The analysis is necessarily informed as well by insights into the operations of the infantry company that I gained throughout the course of fieldwork.

This paper begins with a discussion of the methods involved in this participant observation fieldwork which resulted my access to the Merit Board before moving on to a discussion of the theoretical perspective which I bring to bear on the data available in the transcript. In the main body of the paper I first describe “common-sense” or “folk-theory”

¹ I conducted participant observation fieldwork with a Canadian Regular Force infantry battalion in 1991-1992 and again in 1995-1996. I acknowledge with gratitude the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Doctoral Fellowship 752-94-0219 from 1994 to 1998. I am grateful to the participants in the University of Manchester Department of Social Anthropology Post Graduate Seminar for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper, to students in my Political Anthropology course at University of Calgary for interesting insights.

models of soldierly competence underlying the discussions of the Merit Board. Secondly, I demonstrate how these theoretical models of soldierly competence are applied and negotiated in particular cases during the course of the Merit Board, while considering how decisions about the relative value of evidence offered in support of assessments of competence are made. I then analyse how the orientation of the members of the Merit Board to administrative requirements creates the context in which these models are applied. Finally, I demonstrate how a conflict between two members of the Merit Board affected the final merit ranking produced by the Board.

Methods

I conducted two periods of participant observation ethnographic research with the same battalion, 1 Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (1PPCLI), the first in 1991-1992 and the second in 1995-1996. Throughout the autumn, winter, and spring of '95/'96 I attended the training events of the unit. I also attended the weekly meetings (Orders Groups) chaired by the Company Commander (OC) and attended by the Company Second-in-Command (2ic), the Company Sergeant Major (CSM), the Company Quartermaster (CQ), the three Platoon Commanders and the three Platoon Warrant Officers.

With a few exceptions, I did not conduct formal interviews, but participated as much as possible in the routines of life, and wrote up field notes as soon as possible. With the permission of the soldiers with whom I shared tents in the field, I tape recorded naturally occurring, spontaneous talk. In March of 1996 I asked permission of the Company Commander, which he granted readily, to attend and tape record the proceedings of the annual company Merit Board. Before the proceedings of the Board started, I also asked permission of all those present to attend

and tape record the proceedings, and explained how I would go about ensuring the anonymity of the participants and of the subjects of the Board. In the weeks following the Merit Board I transcribed the tapes and assigned pseudonyms to all the participants and to the subjects of the discussions, in accordance with my agreement with the members of the Board. Although I was not given access to any personal files, several NCMs gave me copies of their own Post-Exercise Reports, so that I could compare the discourse during the Merit Board with some of the documentary evidence that was offered in support of argument.

It is important to point out some of the limitations of the methods on which the analysis in this paper is based. First, it is significant that I was only able to attend one Merit Board, and I make no claim that my findings can be generalized beyond the one case. The unprecedented access I was granted to the Merit Board was based in my having established a long-term relationship of trust with the members of the company with which I had been conducting participant observation, and these relationships did not extend beyond the one company. There is, however, much to be gained from the detailed, in-depth analysis of a single case.

Secondly, there is no way to determine how my presence in the meeting may have altered the behaviour of those participating in the Merit Board. There is evidence in the tape recording that participants on several occasions oriented their discourse to my presence, but for the most part my presence seems to have become part of the “seen-but-unnoticed” background of the meeting. By the time of my attendance at the Merit Board, my presence had generally become routine and unnoteworthy. Moreover, in some senses, the impact of my presence is irrelevant to the analysis, because, regardless of my attendance, the meeting was in fact the one which produced the official Merit List which was taken forward to the Battalion Merit Board.

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical perspective which informs my analysis of the Company Merit Board is ethnomethodology, a social analytical framework developed by, among others, Garfinkel and Cicourel.² The anthropologists Rapport and Overing succinctly summarize the ethnomethodological approach:

The project of ethnomethodology is to build models of the background knowledge and methods of interpretation which local actors ordinarily bring to bear in everyday situations (Rapport and Overing 2000: 130).

This project is similar to the approach adopted by Ben-Ari in his interpretive ethnography of a battalion of Israeli infantry reserves in which he sought to

examine the manner by which military knowledge is internally organized and used for practical purposes (Ben-Ari 1998:21).

Of the empirical studies produced by ethnomethodologists, the more relevant and useful ones for my purposes are those which analyse the social production of statistics and records (see, for example, Atkinson 1978; Cicourel 1974; Mehan 1991 and Garfinkel 1974a), and I use some of their insights in the following analysis of the production of the Company Merit List. Two concepts developed by ethnomethodologists which will help to shed light on the process are reflexivity and recipient design.

Reflexivity, in the sense meant by ethnomethodologists, refers to how accounts and their particulars constitute each other in a back and forth fashion. A pattern, a setting, or an account is understood by reference to its particulars, while at the same time these particulars derive their meaning from the pattern, setting or account of which they are constituent parts (Watson 1987;

Watson 1991). For example, consider a map. We know that a map is a map because of its constituent parts, circles for towns, blue lines for rivers, wavy lines for elevation contours, etc, but at the same time these elements are understood to represent towns, rivers and elevation contours, rather than circles and lines, because we refer to the map itself as an interpretive frame. So the setting (the map) and its particulars (geographical features) constitute each other in a back and forth, reflexive way.

Following from the notion of reflexivity is the understanding that rules, norms, models, and codes of conduct do not, indeed, cannot govern actors' behaviour. Lawrence Wieder, in *The Case of Telling the Convict Code*, convincingly demonstrates that rules, norms, codes, social structure, culture, all these accounts which some social scientists claim to constrain or govern human action do not do so (1974). They are by their very nature general and abstract "maps", which must be applied to specific, particular instances of behaviour (see also Bailey 1980:59). Each time a rule is applied to a particular, concrete, situated activity, the action of applying the rule simultaneously constitutes the rule anew. Understood this way, rules, codes and models are seen as interpretive devices with which social actors account for behaviour, rather than a reified cause of human action

How does the notion of essential reflexivity relate to the Company Merit Board? The Company Merit Board is the meeting at which the officers and the Senior NCOs of the company apply their abstract notions of what a good soldier is to specific individual soldiers, and where they use their observations of actual behaviour as evidence of a soldier's merit. The particular attributes of each soldier then reflexively inform and reconstruct the abstract notion. The Merit

² See, for example: Garfinkel 1964, 1967, 1972; Cicourel 1972, 1974, 1976.

Board is where we can see the “folk theories” of what constitutes a good soldier applied and thereby redefined.

The other concept I want to consider is the notion of recipient design. Recipient design refers to speakers' orientations to the interests and concerns of their listeners (Boden 1994:137; Zimmerman 1992:448-449), but the notion can be extended to consider how actors embedded in a social institution govern their actions with institutional requirements in mind. Recipient design is evident throughout the Merit Board, in how the meeting is organized, and in how documentation is produced, with participants orienting to administrative requirements.

Merit Boards in General

The annual battalion Merit List is the product of a lengthy, ongoing process of evaluation which begins with each soldier's immediate supervisor. Every time a soldier participates in a field exercise, attends a course, or is sent on some tasking away from the unit, his immediate supervisor writes a report on his performance, which is then discussed with him. He is given a copy of the report to read and to keep, and a copy is placed on his file. Also kept on this file are the results of any disciplinary proceedings that may have been held against him, and an annual Personal Evaluation Report (PER), written by his Platoon Commander. In February, the staff of each platoon; that is, the Platoon Commander, the Platoon Warrant Officer and the Section Commanders, put together a list of the members of the platoon in order of merit, based on a summary of the personal files.

In March the company Merit Board is held. This is a confidential meeting, at which the staff of the company combine the three platoon lists into one list for the company. This involves the Platoon Commanders and Platoon Warrant Officers presenting their nominees for top soldier,

second soldier and so forth, and negotiating amongst themselves to determine the ranking within the company. A similar process takes place later at the battalion Merit Board where the battalion staff takes the company Merit Lists and uses these to compile a battalion Merit List. The battalion Merit List as a whole is confidential, but individual soldiers are told where they themselves stand on the list. This final battalion Merit List is compiled with those of the other infantry regiments in the Canadian Forces and it is a soldier's standing on this final, national list which is the deciding factor, after minimum requirements are met, for promotion to higher rank.

Soldiers in the battalion are aware of the function of the Merit Board and its importance to their careers, and they are supposed to be kept informed by their superiors of their standard of performance. Those soldiers who are interested in a long-term military career are keenly interested in their standing on the Merit Board, for, in addition to promotions, the standing is also used to determine priority for attendance on courses and highly valued postings. In orienting to these institutional requirements, soldiers incorporate in their practices the strictures and values of the military organization; in Bourdieu's terms, the organizational requirements become part of their habitus (Bourdieu 1977).

The Merit Board in Particular

The Merit Board was held on a day when the company had been stood down, so that only the members of the Merit Board and the company clerk were at work. The Board was held in the company conference room, the same room where most of the company Orders Groups and meetings were held while in garrison. It was a small (approximately 15' x 16'), windowless room, opening onto the company orderly room. There was just enough space for two tables

pushed together and the 10 chairs surrounding them, along with a chair in the corner where I usually sat for meetings.

The walls were covered with notice boards on which were pinned charts, tables and maps, and, when I entered the room, the Warrant Officers were busy pinning to these boards large pieces of paper on which were printed the names of the top three Privates in each platoon. Everyone was in casual civilian clothes, and the Sergeant Major and the Warrant Officers were joking about the difficulty they had had waking up, as the NCOs had all attended a mess dinner in the Warrant Officer and Sergeants' Mess the night before. There was a box of doughnuts on the table, which the OC had provided.

The OC told the group that I had something to say before the meeting convened. I asked their permission to remain for the meeting, and to tape record the proceedings. I added that I had no need to use names or other identifying characteristics and I assured them that with respect to confidentiality, I would use pseudonyms and that no one but myself would have access to or listen to the tapes. I acknowledged that it was impossible for me to prove that I would follow through on my promises, but that in the end it boiled down to a matter of trust and asked them to trust me. I then offered to leave the room so that they could discuss the issue in private, but they all agreed that there was no need for me to leave.

The OC asked if they were all in agreement and, apparently satisfied with the consensus, he told me to go ahead, so I turned on my tape recorder and the meeting was called to order. The Sergeant Major chaired the remainder of the meeting. The Board followed the same process for each rank of the company. Beginning with the Privates, each platoon listed their top three candidates, and these candidates were discussed until it was deemed that a consensus as to the ranking of the top three in the company had been reached, with the Platoon Commanders and

Platoon Warrant Officers speaking on behalf of their candidates. The Board used the same procedure to determine the three worst soldiers in the company, before considering those in the average range. The same process was followed for the Corporals, for the Master Corporals and for the Sergeants. After the list for the Sergeants had been decided upon, the Platoon Warrant Officers and the CQ left the meeting, and those remaining (all the company officers and the Sergeant Major) repeated the process with respect to the Warrant Officers who had just left.

Models of Soldierly Competence

The Sergeant Major opened the proceedings in the following fashion:

CSM: We're going to do the privates first before we get into the actual corporals. So if we're going to go around the table here, we got five over there four platoon five platoon six platoon. I think what's going to happen 2ic you want to take this pen there and write them down there and we'll just take one from the top and work our way down.
 [indecipherable comments between 2ic and OC.]
 And we'll deal with the privates first. And if I look at the top there's Ryan, Narvey.
 2ic: Gladstone
 CSM: Gladstone and Rumberg in headquarters. So those are your top four.

What is of particular interest in these opening remarks is what was not a part of the instructions. At no point in his instructions to the members of the Board did the CSM discuss what the criteria of a good soldier are. He gave instructions about process, but there was no discussion of what they were looking for, of how these soldiers were to be assessed. He never discussed what is meant by merit nor what constitutes a good soldier. It is apparent by this omission that he (and presumably the OC, on whose behalf he was chairing the meeting) assumed that those present shared a common understanding of what a good soldier is. Since no one asked for clarification about what they were looking for in assigning rankings to soldiers, it

seems clear that the members of the Board shared this assumption that the characteristics of soldierly competence were self-evident and agreed-upon.

Whilst there was thus a tacit assumption of agreement in principle as to the personal qualities of a good soldier it quickly became evident during the course of the meeting that members of the Board held differing models of soldierly competence in mind, and that they disagreed as to how the label of 'good soldier' should be applied in practice, as well as in what constitutes evidence of the characteristics of the 'good soldier'. They also disagreed about the relative weight that should be assigned to the various characteristics of a good soldier, although the vast majority of arguments in support of good soldiering were drawn from performance in the field. Another area of debate involved the extent to which a soldier's perceived performance is attributable to the exigencies of the service as opposed to factors under his control.

To extrapolate from their discussions what constitutes a good soldier for the members of the Board, we can draw on the work of the ethnomethodologists with respect to membership categories. The term 'good soldier' can be thought of as a membership category:

Membership categories may be said to be members' commonsense equivalence classes for the social identification of persons ... Membership categories may conventionally be seen as having category-bound predicates; that is, they are loci for the imputation of conventional expectations, rights and obligations concerning activities (for instance) which it is expectable or proper for an incumbent of a given category to perform (Watson & Weinberg 1982:60).

By looking at the debates about the relative merits of particular soldiers, 'good' and 'bad', it is possible to derive what the general characteristics of the 'good soldier' are. We can see by the juxtaposition in the transcript of claims that a particular soldier is a 'good soldier' with

descriptions of his behaviour and performance what constitute the predicates of the category 'good soldier'. To begin, it is instructive to look at the arguments offered in support of the top soldier and against the worst soldier in each platoon. These are where consensus was most quickly and easily achieved, and where the principles of good soldiering are most evident. It is in the debates over those in the middle ranks of the company where differences of opinion emerged, and it is in these discussions, as well, that particular examples of behaviour are cited in support of the arguments..

Let us begin, then, with the discussions surrounding the best soldiers in the company who approach the ideal, before considering those who can be considered counter-examples, the worst:

WO4: Can I speak on Ryan there, Sergeant Major?

CSM: yeah because

WO4: Okay, everybody remembers he just came in in January direct entry ... in Crowsnest he showed his uh his uh willingness to uh accept responsibility and lead on small tasks. In Wainwright we got a really good look at him he turned out to be a just an excellent private with tons of skill and knowledge in his job and we used some of his leadership skill in Wainwright and he's got *lots* of it.

And:

CSM: And Narvey I think wasn't it?

WO5: He works really well. He's a weapons det commander as a private but he's doing an extremely good job bordering on uh outstanding so.

OC: Seen. Performance.

Lt5: Performance superior to outstanding. The guy has done every job you can think of. He's had a leadership role for the past two and a half to three months. Since after Christmas.

[pause]

CSM: Any word on uh Gladstone?

WO5: Gladstone. Uh, we rate him as superior in our platoon. He stands number one. He's currently a section 2ic he has been a section commander ... Strengths [reading from his notes]. He's in excellent shape he's extremely well motivated he shows good leadership potential he's well organized when put in a leadership role. He has a good working relationship with his peers and uh he has a uh a fair uh an excellent potential for advancement

A good soldier then is someone who accepts responsibility, demonstrates the ability to lead, is in good shape physically, works hard, is highly motivated, and works well with his peers. Let us see how the worst soldiers in the company compare with the candidates for best soldier:

CSM: Okay let's go with now maybe what we should do now is go to the *bottom* of these guys, these crocodiles Pettifer's one (pause) what we'll do is we'll go we'll work from the bottom up now get everybody in the centre there where it's average.

WO6: I got the guy I think we all agree on=

WO5: NO

[laughter]

I don't agree with you, period Lane shut down totally

WO4: you don't agree Couture is] the worst private?

WO5: Couture may be an idiot but he didn't shut down on you totally. This guy shut down on us totally in uh Wainwright cause of the cold. He wouldn't lend a hand to any of the troops but when he got fired as a signaller he wouldn't even advise the guy that took over his job where all of the kit was in the vehicle. He just here you go it's all yours forget it. I was *very* upset with him in Wainwright he *totally shut* down because of the cold weather and uh he got fired

WO6: yeah but is that based on his whole year's performance though?

Lt5: same thing in Suffield though too he got cold

WO5 he did the same thing in Suffield

Lt5: in the carrier the whole time

WO5: when he gets cold he shuts down he turns right off and when you won't sit there and lend a hand to other people. Couture I don't know what his problem is

WO6: Couture has shown improvement but

Lt5: this guy is going

WO5: he will at least lend a guy a hand and this guy just flamed

And:

CSM: other worst privates? Beleveau (pause)

WO6: Pruden

CSM: Pruden (pause) Pettifer

WO6: I think Beleveau's below Pruden

CSM: hmm?

WO6: I think Beleveau is below Pruden

CSM: I have to say that too

WO6: Pruden [uh

CSM: Beleveau]

WO6: Pruden's problem is he needs a big babysitter that's all. Beleveau

WO5: yeah you can't leave him alone for a minute

[indecipherable overlap]

CSM: and Swanlund

WO4: no, Pettifer's better than Pruden. I don't know Swanlund=

WO5: Swanlund has just got a little bit of an attitude problem and compared to the rest of my guys that don't have an attitude problem that's why he's at the bottom of the pile. Every once you'll correct him he'll start rolling his eyes and then you got to correct him on that too. He's just got a bit of an attitude problem but I think he can be straightened out. He learned an important lesson when his name come up for the jump course he got kicked off the list

[overlapping utterances]

WO5: so I think Pruden would be next

2ic: Pruden keeps half this company in full time employment looking after him

?: yeah

OC: seen

WO6: at the same time he doesn't have an attitude he just needs some he just needs to be babysat and if he's got a mission in life he's he's okay.

Lt6: good work ethic

WO6: you know?

Lt5: Swanlund got a good work ethic too

WO5: he he look no he's got a *small* attitude problem that you can notice every once in a while. It's not a full time thing, right? He's uh hasn't been charged, he's not on verbal warning, right, he's just got a slight attitude every once in a while like when he's cold and stuff like that but it's nothing that I would push and fight for him to go farther down

In these transcript excerpts we can see that the qualities of the worst soldier can be contrasted with those of the best. Whereas the best soldier accepts responsibility, and is motivated, the worst shuts down in the cold and lets his peers down. There was some discussion about what the worst characteristics are: WO5 argued that shutting down is a worse trait than being an idiot. Letting down one's peers is the ultimate in bad soldiering. According to WO5, Swanlund "learned an important lesson" when he was not sent on a highly prestigious course, the jump course, because of his performance. It is clear that WO5, at least, perceived Swanlund to be participating in the military ethos which values highly such experiences as a parachute course.

In the next excerpt there was some further debate about the relative importance of various qualities in determining who was the worst soldier. For WO5 the fact the Pruden "needs a full-time babysitter" and "can't be left alone for a minute" was worse than Swanlund's "attitude" problem, which was offset by his "work ethic", demonstrating that being a hard worker

is one of the qualities of the good soldier. It would appear that, fundamentally, WO5 and WO6 disagreed on the relative importance of 'attitude' and hard work, as is evident as the discussion continued:

WO6: he's working when he needs to be babysat he needs to be babysat. He doesn't have an attitude, he la he comes ready to go even though I may have to inspect his kit a million times when he's got the job he humped the C6 in Fort Polk with not a problem.

CSM: I think Pruden is starting to really

WO6 he's [indecipherable]

CSM: open his eyes up

WO6: he doesn't give you a problem as far as insubordination or none of that shit he's solid when he's here as far as yes Warrant no Warrant

WO5: okay I'll agree with you there

After the best and worst privates were determined, the average soldiers were considered and during these discussions it became clear that there was some disagreement as to what qualities should take priority in assessing an infantryman's performance. For example, the OC and CSM each had their own opinions with respect to the relative value of the different characteristics of the good soldier. The OC was preoccupied with physical fitness and toughness. For him a high level of physical fitness and physical and moral toughness were the minimum requirements of the good soldier, and toughness served as a 'tie-breaker' when all other things were equal, as was evident when discussing a Master Corporal:

CSM: I know Malyovanik, I did the write up and he's been I tell ya he's probably one of the most mature, in front of me, Master Corporals in the batt, in this company

OC: but he'd better get a grip on his physical fitness, because he's starting to fucking become a slug, and I expect a junior NCO to have the initiative to go "oh look doughnut filling, I got to get out and do some jogs", you know I expect that kind of initiative

The CSM's preoccupation was with a soldier's performance as a machine-gunner, which is not entirely surprising, as the CSM typically commands the machine gun detachment during

operations, giving him an opportunity to command soldiers and to observe their performance in an extremely physically demanding role:

CSM: I have to fight for Narvey because Narvey one of the reasons is uh he did weapons det commander this last exercise the exercise previous to that he was weapons det he was number one gunner probably one of the best machine gunners I've ever come across

And:

CSM: Pruden's a machine gunner and I he's probably the next one to get into the dirt and grime there things there feed the belt through the gun there and everything else I've never seen a better number two I would take him as number two because he knows what what the hell he's doing when he's throwing about six seven ammo boxes ... I'll have to go with Graham and Bowie, I'll tell you why, cause I don't know much about Graham as a machine gunner now, cause if he was a good machine gunner I would have noticed him.

Another source of disagreement that emerged fairly frequently was how much of a soldier's performance was under his control, as opposed to a result of the exigencies of the service, as in the following:

2ic: does anyone have a problem with Macrimmon being over Crumm
 CQ: I do, just from Wainwright, like I've seen
 Lt5: what did he do in Wainwright
 WO5: he drove a truck
 CQ: he drove for me, that's not his fault, he did a good job for me up there, sir
 WO5: he was 2ic of his section, Macrimmon
 CSM: I got
 CSM: no I got to go with Crumm over Macrimmon
 Lt5: you got a private doing a master corporal's job at times
 CSM: there's not much difference there
 Lt5: there's a lot of difference there, if I was a private and I had a choice between driving a truck and being a section 2ic in the middle of the snow, I would drive the truck
 CQ: he didn't have a choice, he didn't have a choice
 Lt5: okay
 CQ: he was ordered

In this case, the Platoon Commander did not value the experience of driving a truck as much as performing as a Section Second-in-Command, but recognized, only after being reminded by the

CQ, that the soldier in question had no choice in the matter. What came through consistently in the discussions was a difference in the model of soldierly competence used by the Warrant Officers, the Sergeant Major, the Company Commander and the Platoon Commanders.

Generally, the Warrant Officers focused on “attitude”, in particular, they valued soldiers who were compliant and who did not pose disciplinary problems, and especially those who were cooperative with their peers. The CSM, as mentioned above, focussed on machine gun skills, while for the OC, physical toughness was paramount. The Platoon Commanders focused on skills and on potential for leadership. There did seem, however, to be consensus that a soldier’s participation in the military ethos was the most important criterion of the good soldier. What was being evaluated was how committed the soldier was to embodying the values expressed in military discourse.

Applying Models to Soldiers

While it became apparent that there were differences of opinion amongst the members of the Board with respect to what constitutes a model of soldierly competence, greater difficulties yet arose when applying these models of the good soldier to actual soldiers. Part of the difficulty, of course, with applying models to actual, living soldiers, is that models are generalized and simplified, whereas individual soldiers are particular and complex. How, for example, does one compare an inept, but loyal, hard-working Master Corporal with one who is skillful but a disciplinary problem? How does one compare a soldier who has been doing an excellent job in a relatively non-demanding role such as Company Commander’s signaller with one who has been doing a slightly above-average job in a demanding role such as rifleman, the quintessential infantry job? How much weight should be place on one negative incident

involving an otherwise competent soldier? Again and again problems arose and debates developed, particularly about those in the average range of a given rank, because of having to compare apples and oranges, as it were.

For example:

WO6: the reason why I'm saying Proulx, I'll start with him, I'll keep this very brief. The last incident with Proulx was even though Proulx is loose cannon he's still an average soldier, but I think he's a better soldier than Dechant ...

CSM: start convincing me because right now I'm a I'm a little unhappy cause he's sitting there

WO6: who? Dechant?

CSM: Proulx

WO6: Proulx? you want him lower? [pause] one incident

CSM: it doesn't matter though, when he tells me he don't trust his platoon commander

WO6: well [pause] I'm looking at him as a soldier

Lt4: didn't you tell me some that conversation you had with him that time? Saying he didn't care, he didn't give a fuck?

Lt6: performance. yeah, sure, that's what we're saying. He's a bit of a loose cannon, but performance-wise, I've he took over as platoon signaller. He was probably one of our better rifleman, C9 gunner

WO6: if this incident didn't happen, I'd push harder for him to be higher

Lt6: and as platoon signaller he did a good job.

In this case, one incident, the knowledge of which is clearly shared since it does not require detailed description, is enough for the CSM to drop a soldier lower than he would have been otherwise. Similarly there are problems comparing a soldier who has performed poorly, or posed a disciplinary problem, but who has made a great effort to improve with one who has performed consistently:

Lt5: he does, I agree with what Warrant McLeod said, he did have an incident

WO5: he does have problems

Lt5: but he did pick his fucking boots up after that

WO5: and that's why we're rating him

WO6: what I'm saying is Gladstone has never been in that level. He started ahead of Narvey and he kept the same standard ...

WO5: Yeah but now, for a guy to turn it around, and do as well as he is, he's trying harder than anybody I got

And:

WO4: De Coste he's turned, in the field, he was putting out a hundred and ten per cent, all the time. He 's way ahead of what he was doing here last fall, he's, there's a man who's turned himself around.

Lt4: big time

WO4: He was fucking C and P, recorded warning, early in his career, not down, not a problem. His vehicle

CQ: he's solid

WO4: solid

Lt4: he's solid, yeah

WO4: he's an extremely solid corporal.

All of these soldiers pose problems for ranking because of the complexity of their performance over time. The Merit Board is supposed to consider performance of the soldier over the course of the year, but this is problematic, because, naturally enough, a soldier's performance will fluctuate during the reporting period. It would seem natural for superiors to rank more highly a soldier whose performance appears to be improving rather than one whose performance appears to be deteriorating, even if their average performance during the previous year is similar.

A long debate arose over the relative performance of two Master Corporals, one of whom was very capable, but a bit of a disciplinary problem whereas the other was inept, but a very hard-working, committed Junior NCO. The first is described as having trouble making the transition from Corporal after being promoted, while the other, a long-serving Master Corporal, is described as having "poor instructional skills, weak leadership skills", but "accepts criticism well", "doesn't complain". In the final consensus, the dedicated Master Corporal ranked lower than the able, but unpredictable one.

Debate arose as well over how to interpret particular observed behaviour as evidence of personal quality. On a number of occasions, members of the Board differed as to what soldierly characteristics were expressed in action, as the following demonstrate:

OC: the thing with Rachynski, the thing that Rachynski has over Sennett and Lowe is he has a certain savvy, intellectual savvy that is sort of beyond his years a little bit
 WO4: his biggest problem is he thinks a little bit too much of himself
 OC: right
 WO4: but that comes from having a little bit of confidence in himself, Rachynski is definitely next

WO6: this is not a problem I have and I guess it's [] he's going to be the last guy in the company anyway. He he tends to take over from me before I give him the platoon when I'm not there. Okay, I'm not
 CSM: that's anticipation
 WO6: yeah, I know but
 ?: initiative
 WO6: yeah, whatever

It is evident, then, that different types of observed behaviour hold different meanings for the members of the Board, one man's "taking over too soon" is another's evidence of anticipation, or initiative, both highly valued qualities in NCOs. What is not clear is how much the interpretation of behaviour follows previously decided upon rankings rather than being the cause of them.

Throughout the Merit Board it seemed as if the members had made their minds up about the relative merit of those under their command and then sought for the appropriate descriptors and interpretations of behaviour in order to explain and justify their decisions. This tendency is exacerbated by the administrative orientation of the members of the Board.

Administrative Orientation

One striking feature of the proceedings of the Merit Board was how firmly oriented the participants were to administrative requirements, both in the decisions made about the relative merit of soldiers and in the evaluation of evidence of that merit. The OC and the CSM especially were overwhelmingly concerned with the administrative details, in particular, with ensuring that the resulting list was one that would be credible and defensible with documentary evidence when they went to the Battalion Merit Board. Whenever there was a dispute about relative merit, for example, the CSM insisted on the various parties reading from their records:

CSM: I have to put Burgess ahead of Martin
 Lt 4: no
 CSM: yes
 Lt 4: no
 WO 4: I don't think Master Corporal Burgess is as strong as Master Corporal Martin
 CSM: read out your card
 WO 4: Master Corporal Martin. Hard working, as a worker and a leader, good knowledge and skills, never complains. Separates himself from the troops, there's a big point that we've always been talking about in this company is that our NCOs are too friendly with the troops
 CSM: is that it?
 WO4: his post-ex reports I don't have it written here, but I know for a fact it's very good
 CSM: read yours
 WO 5: performs superior, works well with no supervision, he's extremely motivated, he's extremely loyal, and that's with this last exercise we came in, guys were all confused
 CSM: just read out your card
 WO 5: oh, okay, very high degree of professionalism, will accept responsibilities, very high job knowledge skill, strong leadership potential, very resilient, able to turn things around to make it work
 WO 4l:[whisper] I have to get a dictionary
 CSM: read out from the last exercise there, 2ic?
 2ic: Burgess, overall performance superior, requires no supervision, loyal and highly dedicated, strong leadership potential, high job knowledge skills, good attitude. uuum, to add to all of that, uuh, in the short time period I've been here [indecipherable] the road move, he ran it, those particular details that applied to the adm questions, well he went over to transport and sorted it out with them on his own, showing that kind of initiative, uuum, I mean I've seen him in a very limited role, but I think everything that's on his card is legit.

The OC and the CSM were the ones most clearly oriented to administrative requirements, although all of the Warrant Officers demonstrated the same orientation. It should be noted that

inasmuch as the CSM insisted on the use of documentary evidence for performance, these documents had been produced by the Warrants with the Merit Board in mind. The Warrants were constantly aware of the purpose to which the various documents they produced would be put, and they knew, or at least those whose opinions held sway knew, what sort of descriptors of behaviour would be considered valid evidence by the CSM and the OC. This orientation to administrative requirements influenced the sorts of behaviour which the Warrants attended to in their interactions with the soldiers, and made noticeable the type of behaviour that makes its way into the documents. It is through this knowledge of and orientation to the requirements of the 'system', then, that the members of the Merit Board reconstitute anew the very structure of which they are a part.

One of the implications of this administrative orientation with respect to documentation is that a soldier's standing on the Merit List is largely dependent on the record-keeping skills of his superiors, as well as on their use of appropriate jargon and their rhetorical skills. Naturally enough, most of the soldiers are best known by their own superiors, so the other members of the Board must rely on the descriptions of behaviour and the interpretations of that behaviour offered by their own peers to compensate for their lack of direct knowledge and experience of those soldiers who have never worked for them directly. They must then compare these descriptions with their much more detailed and intimate knowledge of their own soldiers.

The OC and the CSM again and again reminded the others of the importance of this pragmatic orientation. Both of them were concerned with the long term consequences to a soldiers' career of the pattern of his annual merit ranking and its articulation with the annual PER. They shared in the knowledge of the pattern of personal development expected of soldiers,

and were aware of the negative career consequences of someone who is ranked high on the

Merit List one year and subsequently is dropped:

OC: well, what we're going to have to do and this is where the Sergeant Major and I earn our pay, rate, we rate them in order. Then we have to sit in the Battalion Merit Board and, we may think Lefebvre and Fedele are superior, we may be forced to put them high above average, low superior, somewhere around there, because, one of the problems you have is if you jump someone too fast in their first year, is you're setting em up, for a big aberration and probably a loss of promotion in future because as soon as they have a little dip, that's a real bad thing on the Merit Board, so anyway these are some of the things we have to consider. The most important thing here is that we got them in the right order. The fact that they're all very junior well, we'll have to work that out. But as long as we got em in the right order then we can uh we can manage the strategy.

It is evident as well from the transcript above and other comments that the OC and the other members of the Board shared in the notion that there was one 'correct' ranking of merit which it was their task to discover. There may have been disagreement over what that ranking was, but there was no doubt that it existed. Although the OC and the CSM shared in this notion that there was indeed an ideal correct ranking, they were aware of the necessity of manipulating this ranking to fit pragmatic ends. In contrast, the Platoon Commanders perceived the pragmatic orientation of the OC and the CSM as morally wrong, and were much more focussed on the notion that it was their task to discover the one correct ranking of the company, and to present this ranking to the Battalion Merit Board, as the following excerpt illustrates:

OC: what we've got to be careful of here too is we can't push a guy too fast, too quickly. I'm not saying Scott doesn't deserve to be pushed, I am pushing him, he's fucking second on our list which is pretty good for a first year Sergeant, but if we're trying to convince Niner that this guy should be a Warrant next year, we're just doing this guy a lot of damage,
 CSM: that's what we're doing
 WO 4: no, he shouldn't be a Warrant next year, I agree with you there
 OC: we got to tone it down, and I'll bet you, just from what I've seen of Scott, cause I really like the guy too, I think he's excellent, but you can't tell me he couldn't use another couple of years in rank to learn things along the way.
 WO 4: one of the things we got to do for Scott is get him some more experience, out of this company, in other

CSM: I can cross post him
 OC: four platoon would be nice for him
 WO 4: cause he's got his mortars, but that's not a good job for him
 OC: yeah but he's only got the course, right? he hasn't actually served
 WO 4: we've got to get him on a basic course, and basically send him to recce det
 OC: he needs to serve in rank
 Lt 4: maybe I'm not too sure how all this works, in the scope of the years to follow and how fast he is promoted Warrant, now I'm not aware of that, but I will stand here and defend this man and call him a true leader, as a Sergeant and as an infantryman, cause to me that's what he is
 OC: you don't have to convince me
 2ic: we're all aware of that
 CQ: but he's not ready to be a Warrant next year and the number one Sergeant of the company could be the number one Sergeant in the battalion which means he's going to be a Warrant this year or next year and he's not ready to be a Warrant

The difference in orientation between the OC and the Platoon Commanders is especially clear in the discussions amongst them after the NCOs have left the room:

OC: guys got any uh things you want to bring up amongst us? I think so, go ahead
 Lt 6: just one thing that still bugs me, Sir?
 OC: yeah?
 Lt 6: is that we've been all the way up through Private today, and it still came up, I don't know how many times, when did he get promoted? I know there's this thing where you have to say we can't put him up right now because I mean we're setting him up for a big fall. What happens if he doesn't keep his performance up?
 2ic: that's unfortunately the system
 Lt 6: the system is wrong, so why do we work with it? That's my, that's my problem, okay?
 OC: you have to you have to, there comes a point, cause I understand exactly where you're coming from, cause I have said the same thing for years, believe it or not, but there comes a point, when you sit through some of the unit level Merit Boards and you suddenly realize that is that it is significant, and you have to adapt to the realities, so where we had situations where it was fucking this guy or that guy, this guy or that guy, right, when was he promoted, cause sometimes that'll have a bearing on whether or not he should be better than he is now already. Or if, given the benefit of the doubt if [] we'll give the nod to experience
 Lt 5: the way I understand it, it's much better to start off at a relatively good plateau and show consistent increase.
 OC: correct
 Lt 5: you go to a high spot and any kind of dip whatsoever, from what I've seen, is more detrimental to be in that spot. You're putting all your marbles in one bag with that guy
 OC: yeah
 Lt 5: if he has one bad year, reporting period, he's fucked
 OC: yeah, that's exactly the way it works. What happens is if you start out. Let's say we took Scott and gave him a superior PER this year, if next year, in recce platoon, he gets an above average? you should see the detrimental effect it has in a career review board, the way they

assign a point system? if he drops, as soon as you drop, it affects you, usually for up to two, three years, in a drop

Lt 4l: I was willing to concede that, in a

OC: yeah

Lt 4: that's fine, from what you guys told me, I said okay

OC: but that's fine. In this Merit Board, though, we're more concerned with the relative performance. That's something the Sergeant Major and I have to concern ourselves with in the Battalion Merit Board. If we see that Scott's, for example, getting a high superior or something, we, even though, he may deserve it, we've got to be very careful, cause if he goes to recce and has a bad year in recce? Fuck, we'll tube him for the next two or three years, he'll have to fight, he'll have to fight like a bastard to recover that drop and that's the way the merit system works

2ic: I'll tell you what though, I thought we had a sort of consensus here that uh when we came to that situation, most of the troops were on the same level, so it wasn't like we were pushing one ahead of another, like

OC: that's right

2ic: that performance has been there

Lt 6: It's just that the number of times that you know, that time-in comes into play,

OC: sure it does

Lt 6: it makes me feel uncomfortable because

OC: but, but it does have performance implications as well, if you think about it. For example, Shea. I mean, he's been a strong, strong performer now, what for four years? As a Sergeant. Excellent report, outstanding reports from Borden and everything else. So, here's a Sergeant that's been faced with a whole series of wide-ranging problems with exercises and he's consistently performed very strongly, and then we've got Scott, who's been on how many exercises? since he's become a Sergeant? Three maybe? two?

Lt 6: yeah

OC: and he's done excellent on two or three exercises. It's hard to say, well, therefore, he's better than Shea, because, well, maybe Sergeant Scott'll have a couple of bad exercises next year, faced with a whole new, entirely different problem, so in other words, there comes a point when you've got to give a consistent long-rang performance the nod over the young, new, hotshot. Okay? who may be a hotshot, and I personally believe that, but it's possible that, he may have problems, he needs to gain experience. Anyway, asking for the level of experience, it does have some bearing. Where it's wrong is when somebody asks who's more senior, he's more senior, so stick him up there, with no reference to performance. Does that satisfy you a little bit?

Lt 6: a little bit, Sir.

It is evident in this slice of dialogue that Lt 6 was unconvinced by the OC's explanations, but he had no choice but to accept them.

The conflict between the idealistic orientation of the Platoon Commanders and the pragmatic orientation of the NCOs, the OC and the 2ic escalated in the final moments of the

Merit Board into a heated argument between Lt 4 and the CSM during the course of which the CSM committed an egregious, but effective, for his purposes, breach of the moral order of the company. I want to consider this conflict in detail because it demonstrates how the antagonistic relationship which developed between the CSM and this Platoon Commander affected the determinations of the Board.

Relationships

What I intend to do in the rest of this paper is to offer a brief synopsis of the event before analysing the event, relying on the transcript, but also relying on my knowledge of the larger context.³ While some conversation analyst purists might balk at the latter, and insist on relying on the transcript alone, I would argue that it is impossible, and indeed undesirable and in a sense dishonest, to divorce myself from my own experiences and knowledge B experience and knowledge which indeed is part of the common experience and the held in common stock of knowledge of the other participants in the interaction. Nevertheless, as Widdicombe has pointed out: "while shared, normative knowledge is a resource in talk, speakers must evoke that knowledge, and make it relevant to the business at hand" (Widdicombe 1998:70). Certainly the ethnographic context, in my view, contributes to our awareness of the participants in the meeting as living, breathing human beings, not just as speakers and hearers.

The synopsis

For the purposes of this analysis the story begins after the Warrant Officers had left the room to the OC, the 2ic, the CSM, the three Platoon Commanders and the myself. Those in the room knew that the objective was now to rank the four Warrant Officers in the company, and

that having done that, this lengthy and difficult process would be over. The best and second best Warrants were relatively quickly decided, but when it came to deciding the third and fourth, a debate ensued between Lt 4 and the CSM, each supporting his Warrant (Warrant Scopel and the CQ, respectively) for third place. After an impasse was reached, the debate became more heated and personal, and the CSM revealed to Lt 4 that Warrant Scopel, had complained to the CSM about him (Lt 4). There was some angry discussion about this revelation, during which the OC left the room. Finally, after the return of the OC, Lt 4 agreed to drop Warrant Scopel to last place.

Some of the ethnographic context which I believe is relevant to the analysis of the breach includes the fact that the CQ is an appointment which is supposed to be filled by the best Warrant Officer in the company. The fact that this CQ had already been dropped to third place was a warrantable matter for the CSM and the OC; that is, it is something that they would be required to account for when they attended the Battalion Merit Board. As the two of them together had been responsible for his appointment, they would have to explain in the Battalion Merit Board why he was not number one in the company. This is explicitly stated by the CSM.

Another element of the context that is important is the nature of the relationship between Platoon Commanders and their Warrants. This relationship is supposed to be one of trust and mutual support, at least in the ideal. In practice, the relationship is often one of conflict, but the ideal was part of the shared expectations of those in the room. The Warrants also have a competing trust relationship with the CSM, and it was his knowledge of this competing imperative that the CSM manipulated to get his way. These contextual matters are alluded to by the OC and the 2ic during their attempts to repair the breach.

³ A transcript of the incident is included as an appendix to this paper

One element that is noticeable by its absence, and this absence is only noticeable after reading the entire transcript of the Merit Board, is that there was no mention made of the relative physical fitness standards of the CQ and the Warrant who were the subject of the debate. During earlier discussions, physical fitness served as a tie-breaker when participants could not come to an agreement on ranking. And, importantly, it was usually the OC who raised the issue for discussion. But in the case of the CQ and Warrant Scopel, there was no mention at any time of the level of physical fitness of either of them. Whether this was because physical fitness was irrelevant for Warrants or whether there was some other reason, we cannot determine from the transcripts, yet it was obvious to me that WO Scopel was far fitter physically than was the CQ. Let us turn now to the analysis of the transcript.

Analysis of the transcript

The discussion began with assigning first ranking to Warrant O'Connor. This was accomplished quickly, with little debate. I have not included that short debate in the transcript as the substance of it is not relevant to the matter at hand. In the early stages of the debate, the CSM used a time-honoured negotiating tactic, by giving a concession in the hopes of gaining a reciprocal concession from those with whom one is negotiating (Gulliver 1979:111). He proposed that the CQ should be ranked second, after O'Connor, and offered to support his proposal with argument; but then he capitulated quickly and emphatically, in response to the OC's suggestion that McLeod should be ranked second. He had set his sights for the CQ higher than expected, gave way quickly, but then dug his heels in during the next stage of the negotiation. The real argument arose in deciding who would be ranked the last Warrant in the company.

The OC turned the floor over to Lt 4, in recognition of the fact that this debate was now between him and the CSM. Lt 4 opened with reference to knowledge which was shared, specifically, that he and Warrant Scopel had not always got on, but he went on to describe how Warrant Scopel's performance and the relationship between the two of them had improved. The qualities that he cited of Warrant Scopel and of the relationship can be read as a statement of the model of the ideal relationship between a Platoon Warrant and a Platoon Commander: he makes helpful suggestions; they have an open and trusting relationship; he shows initiative by getting things done in the field that are beyond the Platoon Commander's expectations and experience; and he acts as mediator between the Platoon Commander and the Section Commanders. In response to this glowing recommendation, the OC mentioned problems he had encountered with the Warrant, problems he describes as a "chippy attitude", although he acknowledged later that the problem appeared to have been resolved.⁴

Immediately, however, the CSM served notice of his intention to rank the CQ third, to the apparent surprise of Lt 6 and to the clear disagreement of Lt 4. The CSM asserted categorically twice that he would not agree to rate the CQ lower than Warrant Scopel, an assertion which was followed by some discussion about whether or not the CSM had been aware of problems with the CQ identified by Lts 4 and 6. Notably, the CSM did not respond to the 2ic's question, "why not?" but left the floor to the OC to continue the debate about the merits of the CQ.

An impasse was reached when the CSM and Lt 4 made clear that there would be no capitulation on either side:

CSM: I can't go with the CQ to the bottom of the list, in the company. I cannot. I won't leave the room, until he's

⁴ I have edited out the details of the incident to which the OC referred as it might serve to identify the Warrant Officer involved.

Lt4: well, we're all going to be here tomorrow then

In F.G. Bailey's terms, what had occurred was a confrontation: Lt 4, in stating "we're all going to be here tomorrow then", was making a claim about his power to extend the discussion until he got his way (Bailey 1980:29). As we will see, this confrontation led to what Bailey would term an encounter, in which Lt 4's claim is proved to have been a hollow one (Bailey 1980:29). At this point in the debate, then, both the CSM and Lt 4 had stated clearly and unequivocally where they stood and had served notice that they would not move from their positions. The discussion now veered off onto another tangent, Lt 4 attempting to revisit the ranking of the second Warrant in the company, and with more and more heated arguments about the relative merits of now three of the Warrants in the company. At one point in the discussion, which I have not included in the interests of brevity, an argument arose between two of the Platoon Commanders and the Company Commander about their (Platoon Commander) own performance of their duties, and the CSM stood up, and offered to leave the room, but was told by the OC to remain. He did not leave the room, but remained standing for the rest of the meeting, giving him a decided physical advantage over the seated Lt 4 during the climax of the argument.

Again Lt 4 offered the argument that whereas at the beginning of the training year he and Warrant Scopel did not get on, they had now achieved a good working relationship, and that while Warrant Scopel was not perfect, he had certainly improved. Finally, the 2ic and the OC brought the discussion back to the critical point, where do Scopel and McNish (the CQ) stand vis-à-vis each other? And it was at this point when the decision was about to be made that the CSM made his move and turned the confrontation into an encounter:

2ic: how does he rank against Warrant McNish

OC: right, and that's the problem. Does Scopel go ahead of or behind McNish?

CSM: I would think Warrant Scopel goes *behind* McNish. Uh uh, I'm going to be honest with yas, Sir, I shouldn't say it right here, I've had more complaints about you from him, but don't come to me and complain about it, go assist and direct and bring you up as a good captain down the road. Cut and dry.

The first thing I want to discuss about this excerpt is what purpose is served by the CSM's preliminary statement: "I'm going to be honest with you, Sir, I shouldn't say it right here". We can consider it in two parts. First the CSM says, "I'm going to be honest with you, Sir", and then, "I shouldn't say it right here". Neither utterance is designed for giving information: that the CSM is going to be honest with a Platoon Commander in the Merit Board should go without saying. The saying of it then must serve some purpose other than offering information. Nor is the second part of the utterance simply a communication of information, for if it were, surely it is unnecessary. The CSM says first that he shouldn't say it (whatever "it" is, and we are soon to discover that) but then he goes ahead and says it. If he were both honest and should not say it, he would neither say "it", nor say he "shouldn't say it". But in fact he does all three: he says he is going to be honest, then he says he probably shouldn't say "it", then he says "it". What is going on here? It is fairly evident that whatever "it" is, it is going to be some sort of breach of the moral order. How do we know that? How do we as readers of the transcript know that something unpleasant is about to be spoken, and how are we sure that the Platoon Commander for whom the utterance is produced must be expecting some sort of breach?

I suggest that what is going on here is a pre-emptive excuse. Herzfeld, basing his argument on Austin's work, argues that what is important about excuses is that they demonstrate that one is familiar with the rules, not necessarily that one is innocent of wrongdoing (Austin 1971, 1992; Herzfeld 1996). In this case the CSM is demonstrating at one and the same time that he understands that what he is about to say will breach the moral order, but that this is something that he is forced to do, in adherence with a higher

moral order - the requirement for honesty. This interchange is the first effort to repair the breach and it occurs prior to the breach itself. It should be noticed that this was one of the few times in during the Merit Board that the CSM addressed Lt 4 correctly, as "Sir", which I believe was a rhetorical device to demonstrate his adherence with the norms of the battalion, by paying lip service to it. Furthermore, he was forestalling any criticism for his having said "it", by suggesting that he has already acknowledged a moral dilemma and had resolved it in favour of honesty, over what? Perhaps tact. This hypothesis is confirmed when, a few moments later in Lt 4 said, "okay, but you're pulling a shock tactic right?" followed by loud overlap, followed by the CSM shouting, "I just said I shouldn't have brought it up here". This is clearly a statement supportive of Herzfeld's point: it is more important for the CSM to demonstrate his awareness that he ought not to have brought it up than it is not to have brought it up in the first place. In demonstrating his awareness that he was about to breach a norm and in attempting to forestall any criticism with pre-emptive excuses, the CSM was reproducing the moral order which he is about to breach.

What are the consequences then of those two phrases, "I'm going to be honest with yas, Sir" and "I shouldn't say it right here"? With the first, the CSM establishes himself as a "good senior NCO", one who is both honest ("I'm going to be honest with yas") and respectful of officers ("Sir"), but who is faced with the dilemma of competing imperatives (honesty versus tact, or perhaps trust between him and WO Scopel) . What is important is that he is using competing interpretations of the moral code of the company as a resource to accomplish his aim, which he has clearly stated earlier: he is not going to leave the room with the CQ last.

Lt 4's response to the CSM's utterance leaves no doubt that, indeed, a serious breach has occurred. On the tape there is an audible gasp at this moment as he made it clear that this is a low blow. In fact, he later described the remark as a "kick in the balls". His initial response was one of disbelief, and he seemed unable to accept that he has heard the CSM correctly. First both interlocutors paused, then Lt 4 gasped, and then he appeared to be about to ask the CSM to repeat what he had just said, but he was interrupted with the CSM's reiteration of his 'response' to Warrant Scopel. He then asked the CSM to sit down and talk things over, to which the CSM responded with what can only be described as "rubbing it in": he asked, "see what I just said?" Lt 4 asked again for confirmation that he had heard correctly, and the CSM poured salt on the wound that he had caused by going into some detail about the number of complaints he had had from the Warrant whom Lt 4 had been so energetically praising. Lt 4 continued to appear to be asking for clarification of what had been discussed between his Warrant and the CSM, when the OC left the room, thereby abdicating his role as chair of the meeting and as the commander of the company. The OC's leaving the room can be read as implicitly throwing his support behind the CSM, and this support is critical to the resolution of the encounter.

In the OC's absence, Lt 4 continued to seek clarification, even going to the extent of seeming to offer an alternate interpretation of what had gone on by admitting to a disagreement between himself and the Warrant, but then he finally, accused the CSM of using a shock tactic. The CSM loudly returned to his pre-emptive excuse and made the claim that he was motivated by honesty and loyalty. Lt 4 repeatedly attempted to make the CSM answer the question of why this was brought up at this particular time, but it

was evident that they were talking at cross purposes, when the 2ic attempted to calm the situation by telling the CSM to leave the room to have a smoke. The CSM ignored him entirely, failing even to acknowledge this order, and continued to hammer at the same point, that Warrant McNish is superior to Warrant Scopel, persisting in the fiction that their relative merits are the current topic of the discussion. Lt 4 refused to be swayed and continued to question the CSM's motivation and timing, until the CSM admitted to his motivation: that he would not leave the room with the CQ rated below WO Scopel.

In the next five lines he demonstrated his orientation to the administrative requirements and to the expectation that the CQ *should* be the best Warrant in the company. At this point, the OC reentered the room, presumably having had the time to ponder his course of action, but apparently hoping that one would not be required of him when he asked, "did we resolve anything here?"

In fact, nothing had been resolved, and after some acrimony between the CSM and Lt 4, the OC tried to mend the breach by normalizing the conversations which the CSM claimed to have had with WO Scopel, and he even used Lt 4's given name, which is highly unusual in a setting in which officers and NCOs are co-present. Nevertheless, the breach involved not so much the fact that WO Scopel had been complaining about Lt 4, as the fact that the CSM had brought it up in the context of the Merit Board in an attempt to get his way, which was expressed succinctly by Lt 4. Again, the CSM clearly expressed his motivation for committing the breach, and it is clear that he had succeeded when Lt 4 capitulated entirely. At that point the battle was won by the CSM; the encounter was resolved, and it is evident that it was the CSM and not the Platoon Commander who wielded the power in the company.

What is interesting to consider at this point is what makes the tactic employed by the CSM so very effective in achieving his goal. A closer examination of the event reveals a very able manipulation of identities on the part of the CSM, which left Lt 4 with no option but to give in. A similar technique is described by Dennis Day in his contribution to Antaki and Widdicombe's *Identities in Talk* (Antaki & Widdicombe 1998a; Day 1998). What the CSM has done is to disqualify Lt Mull from being able to speak on behalf of his Warrant. He has been able to do this by relying on his and his co-participants' shared knowledge of expected social relationships within the battalion. As Widdicombe has pointed out, in the volume cited above, identity categories are conventionally associated with particular activities and other characteristics (Widdicombe 1998:53). Through descriptions of activities it is possible for one person to assign another to a particular category which can have the effect of disqualifying that person from a certain range of activities. This is precisely what the CSM has done to Lt 4, and in so doing, he has done more than get his way, he has undermined the authority of the Platoon Commander, and even of the Company Commander.

To begin, in what I have described above as his pre-emptive excuse, the CSM has cast himself as loyal but honest and trustworthy, as concerned with the correct functioning of the unit, and as knowledgeable about the state of relationships within the company. He is trustworthy in the sense that he is someone that Warrant Scopel feels he can approach with problems related to his relationship with his Platoon Commander (the fact that by bringing it up in this context undermines his trustworthiness might have been used as a resource by Lt 4 had he been sufficiently motivated, and not quite so upset). All these are qualities which are expected of a CSM and these expectations were shared

by those present. At the same time he has, by his revelation of Warrant Scopel's complaints, cast the Warrant in question as someone who is both disloyal and unable to manage appropriately his relationship with his Platoon Commander. This contributes rather nicely to his stated agenda of reducing Warrant Scopel to fourth Warrant in the company. During his attempts to repair the breach, the OC tries, apparently unsuccessfully, to recast Warrant Scopel as loyal by suggesting that his complaints are part of the normal activities engaged in by all Warrant Officers.

With respect to Lt 4, the CSM has, without accusing him of anything, merely by describing the behaviour of his Warrant Officer, cast him as an incompetent officer. One of the more important tasks of an officer is to "know your men", yet by demonstrating that Lt 4 is not even aware that his own Warrant Officer has been complaining about him, behind his back, to the CSM, the CSM has ably shown that this Platoon Commander does not fulfill one of the minimum requirements of an officer. This tactic is especially compelling coming, as it does, after Lt 4's eloquent and heated argument in support of his Warrant. Lt 4, demonstrably unaware of his own relationship with his Warrant, is thereby disqualified from being able to speak with any authority whatsoever about the merits of his Warrant Officer. This is what makes the tactic so effective, without even considering the emotional blow that the CSM's revelation constitutes.

Intentionally or not, the CSM has dropped a dilemma into the lap of the OC. An NCO has just undermined the authority of an officer in the presence of the OC. By leaving the room when he does, the OC abdicates his responsibility for maintaining the authority structure of the company and effectively gives up control of the company to the CSM. His attempts at normalizing the behaviour of Warrant Scopel do not address the

root issue, which is that the CSM has got his way by destroying the credibility of a young officer.

I have analysed this social drama in detail because it so forcefully demonstrates how the agonistic process of the Merit Board determines the final outcome of the Board's deliberations. I am not concerned here with which of the four Warrant Officers under discussion should indeed have come last on the list – that would be falling into the same frame of mind of the members of the Board in assuming that there is one right ranking of the members of the company. What is of concern is how the decision to rank WO Scopel last was finally taken. The fiction persisted that the outcome of the Board was the result of a consensus amongst the members of the Board, but it is clear to me that calling Lt 4's capitulation consensus is a stretch indeed.

In conclusion, I believe that I have demonstrated through my analysis of the Merit Board transcript how members of the Board employ common-sense notions of what soldierly competence consists of to describe, interpret and evaluate perceived behaviour on the part of the soldiers under their command. They are firmly oriented to administrative requirements both in deciding how to rank soldiers and in how to evaluate evidence of performance. I have shown as well how the agonistic process itself leads to particular outcomes as relationships between the members of the Board affect the decisions of the Board. It might be tempting to infer that the Merit Board system itself is flawed and in need of repair; however, I would argue that the problems and difficulties evident in the transcript are nothing more or less than the natural difficulties of trying to take the complexities and messiness of real people living real lives and place them into some "objective" and measurable ranking structure.

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Appendix - Transcript

- OC: So, we'll do the warrants fairly quickly guys?
- CSM: yeah. you can write it on here
[noise of paper rattling]
- CSM: I don't think uh [] and everything else, I'd probably place O=Connor number one [] I'll just tell you now, cause I play with them a lot more
- OC: who's that

- Lt4: Warrant O=Connor
 Lt5: Warrant O=Connor
 CSM: I'd probably go then, the CQ, McLeod, Scopel, in that order one, two three four. Uh are they, is there any objections? and if you want me to put input, I can put, I can lay it on the line
 OC: first standing, O=Connor is number one, does anybody debate that?
 ... [there is some discussion here about O'Connor's performance}.....
 OC: and he's got a *hell* of a lot of potential, umm,. he did an excellent job as a platoon commander in Louisiana
 Lt6: mmhm
 OC: and uh, at a time when Warrant McLeod was still sort of struggling with the platoon 2ic responsibilities. He was still struggling a bit umm I would see McLeod as number two, however, based on what you've said.
 CSM: who?
 OC: McLeod number two, based on what his platoon commander just said
 CSM: I'll buy that
 Lt5: me too
 Lt6: I concur
 OC: Okay, so *your* ball now
 Lt4: well, he's turned around since, you're well aware that it was a bit rough at first, okay? simply because his style of leadership was different than mine. He's pretty, Warrant Scopel's pretty laid back, that's the way he does things. Umm, he's not a real take charge gung-ho guy, by no means, so, when I first came here there was a few problems and I recognize that. He went on course, he finished middle third, which is good. Since then, things have been working a hundred and ten per cent better. Things have turned around. He always fills me in on stuff now, we have open, he always has suggestions for me, he's always getting shit done in the field that I've never seen before. He's done a one eighty basically is what I'm trying to say. And it's really showing. Like times when the section commanders and I disagree on platoon tactics? he will organise for us to sit down and get a pen and talk about it for an hour, he never lets stuff sit on, you know, whereas before I think he would've said to the section commanders, yeah I'm on your side, you know maybe the platoon commander will get it straightend out. Now he's, no, Sir, I see your points, guys, I see your points, let's talk about it, and it's really noticeable to me. I don't know if you noticed anything at all
 OC: he was getting under my skin there on a couple of things too and we had a little chat there just a few days ago ... he sort of explained himself, he was uh he was starting to get a little bit on my nerves too, this
 Lt4: I noticed that, Sir
 OC: this chippy attitude and this not really being proactive, but uh anyway, that's resolved
 CSM: I'd have to put CQ next, anyway, and not Warrant Scopel.
 Lt4: no, definitely not
 CSM: I will not drop the CQ that low. No way

Lt6: can I ask you to emphasize that? Cause all I've heard for the past six months

Lt4: *shit*

Lt6: has been problems with the CQ, Sergeant Major, and

CSM: why is no one bringing the problems up to me? I'm identifying it on my own,

OC: I think you *are* aware of some of the problems

CSM: but I've been probing and having to dig out it out myself

OC: yeah

... [there is some lengthy discussion here about the CQ's weaknesses, about problems in the relationship he has with the platoon warrants, and about his lack of potential for career advancement]

CSM: I don't want to drop the CQ that low though

2ic: why not?

OC: because then it becomes a question of the CQ versus Warrant Scopel, for a young warrant who's learning the ropes, and has good potential. So, how do we rationalize these two things, because, I know, I know we're slamming the CQ here a little bit, but at the same time, you know, they're getting cries like how he's, he's a very genial

Lt5: he's effective up to a certain standard

OC: you're right, but I mean overall, our tone is that we're talking about problems, but at the same time the guy's got the attitude, the desire to serve the company, that's tremendous, so, how do we compare that with

CSM: I can't go with the CQ to the bottom of the list, in the company. I cannot. I won't leave the room, until he's

Lt4: well, we're all going to be here tomorrow then

2ic: problem with most of the company, that's not as important as where he'll fall out later on

CSM: I've had my heartaches with Warrant Scopel, reports and returns,

Lt4: yup

CSM: um, I don't have that with the CQ, if he was a platoon warrant

Lt4: right, but let's look at leadership, of Warrant's leadership potential or leadership job, and below our level, things fall apart. Ever since I've been here, and the two other platoon commanders will agree with me on this, things are the shits, down in the shacks, with the CQ. Every problem I hear about is with the CQ. Now sure there's day to day bitching as there always will be, but when I hear specific examples, I wonder, why the hell is this doing this, why the hell is this working this way, it shouldn't be working this way. I go is this the norm down here and they say, no, sir, no, sir, the last CQ could do that same job with two guys that he's doing with twenty of our men. And I hear that and I shouldn't be hearing that.

CSM: see this is the problem too, Sir, is this is your first CQ in a rifle company here, your first CQ, you would go probably into shock, with your next man in here as CQ. I'm going to have to buy you, I'm going to have to buy it, but, *Goddamn*

.... [more discussion of problems in the relationship of the CQ and the platoon warrants]

CSM: he doesn't have the relationship where he's supposed to have between himself and the three platoon warrants. Now, there's a couple of times where I told him, to go in there, grab the three platoon warrants, you guys sort yourselves out because there's a lot of fucking going around in circles, down there below. You're, he's *he* is supposed to set the example and assist and direct the three platoon warrants like, platoon warrants assist and direct and train the platoon commanders up here. Uh he's the next senior man in the company, to me. He's my understudy, the three platoon warrants are his, and uh, it's not happening down there

.... [more discussion of the relationship of the CQ and the platoon warrants]

CSM: it would be very very interesting, like you just mentioned performance, there, is to put like Warrant Scopel in there as a CQ for an exercise. Say, here, let's see what you can do. Um. I can't rate the CQ lower than Warrant Scopel, and I'll tell you why, is because he did. You look at that at that schedule behind those flip sheets there, umm he's [], he's been switching staff left and right, and he's up, he's got his back up against the wall and he's been doing, I think, pretty outstanding for what he's got to play with for time wise, you your time estimate, uh times factored to plan and prepare for his exercise, um Scopel? yeah, he'd he'll make a CQ down the road one of these days, but I just can't see it. I have to go with CQ, then Warrant Scopel.

Lt4: well, we're going to have to find the medium here, through other means ... But, you know, I don't mean to flip flop around, but I've heard bad things about your Warrant as well. I've heard that he's got problems with his platoon, and my NCOs, we we got a half decent relationship and they tell me stuff that goes down and Warrant McLeod, at least we don't have Warrant McLeod, the way he jacks up the troops all the time and stuff like that, so when when we put that up there and Warrant McLeod was second, I never said anything, but it seems there's more negativity toward Warrant Scopel

CSM: I, I got to interrupt here, I see three styles of leadership down there with the three warrants, three standards with the platoons. I see six platoon inspecting their rooms the way a warrant officer should, platoon warrant. I seen five platoon do it now, but I've never ever seen four platoon

Lt4: four platoon does

CSM: *formed up*, for roll call, where I've seen five and six at least twice a day. Every day, where I've seen a corporal, going with a clipboard, walk in that living in room there where the troops are putting their feet up, smoking and that, Private Bloggins, Corporal so and so, Private so and so. Never ever formed up to enforce discipline on the soldier, where they should be formed up, I don't care where, but at least formed up in three ranks, and an NCO calling roll. Six platoon does it twice a day, five platoon does it twice a day

Lt4: so being anal is good?

CSM: no I see this, don't

2ic: are you saying that Scopel should be ahead of McLeod?

CSM: I see this

Lt4: no, but, I'm just saying like there's negative shit coming out about Warrant Scopel, like almost an over abundance, now I know there's

CSM: no what I'm doing is placing the CQ above Warrant Scopel

Lt4: you just happen to like his leadership style better, is what you're saying

CSM: no I'm not

OC: I think part of it too, is that uh, we've had more time with McLeod and he's developed more in the last year? Scopel's been away, a lot

Lt4: Sir, Scopel doesn't bitch *half* as much as Warrant McLeod and that's a fact.

OC: that's *one* of the things I'm talking about

CSM: Scopel's going to be a good CQ down the road, with experience. He just come off his 6B.

Lt4: this man, fuck, when he doesn't like something, I tell ya we know

OC: oh, I know, and that's one of the things we've been working on with him the last some six months or so, and there has been improvement

Lt6: there *has* been improvement, and he *does* come up with solutions. Why don't we do it this way?

Lt5: that's a big thing there, for him to come up

Lt6: he comes up with solutions, whereas

Lt5: you'd think Warrant Scopel he does have solutions to plans, but I have noticed at times, we're on a conference, he's the first guy to say, that's fucked. and that's it, but Warrant McLeod I've noted will do that, but he will also say, you know why don't we do it this way

CSM: recommendations

Lt5: Warrant Scopel sometimes, too, but I have noticed sometimes when he does it he just opens it up

CSM: the CQ sees that too, and I've seen it there

Lt6: I don't like to admit it, but yes, you hear almost every soldier in the battalion talking about six platoon, now you may call it anal retentiveness, but if you look inside the book, follow the CO's directives, you will see that Warrant McLeod is following those, to the letter. He's not overstepping his bounds, he's not uh a being less retentive than as is necessary. He's still disciplining the platoon

CSM: I think Warrant McLeod has the potential to be an RSM, I don't think Warrant Scopel does

2ic: agreed

CSM: that's the way I look at it

Lt6: he's not a great warrant office, I'll give you that, you know, and

2ic: we're spending a lot of time here trying to compare the two and we we're not here to do that right now

Lt6: in terms of

2ic: unless you're trying to fight for Scopel to be ahead of McLeod, we're wasting our time here.

OC: are you trying to suggest, perhaps, that McLeod and Scopel are equivalent, or

Lt4: Scopel hasn't been around enough to develop, is what I'm trying to get at

OC: right

- Lt4: we've had all this time to work on McLeod
- OC: correct
- Lt4: and that, but Scopel, he's been gone [], and he started out rough, okay? points against, points against. He come back and now I see him turning around, and I see it, because I'm working with the guy. Mind you, he's not as proactive as I'd like, you know, I'll give you that much, and maybe not as much as you'd like, and he's not, he's not the high-intensity inspection guy, but, he gets things done, and he's working on things, you know
- OC: I understand that. I understand that. The thing is that since Warrant McLeod's been with us since last summer, and there has been a steady improvement in his performance, where Warrant Scopel's not been here for one reason or the other, as you know, not been with us on things, and so his level of performance now because he has not been with us long enough
- Lt4: is on a slower
- OC: is, he's he's behind the power curve
- Lt4: yes
- OC: with McLeod.
- Lt4: agreed
- OC: Now, is that unfair? Well, maybe a little bit, because if he'd been here all year, I'll bet you he and McLeod would probably be about the same, in different ways, they'd be about the same. But right now, I think clearly, we got Scopel is behind the power curve there with McLeod
- Lt4: and he is snippy. I'll give you that much. I didn't like him when I first met him, and for you guys who haven't worked with him, he comes across that way. You know that, Sir.
- OC: oh yeah,
- Lt4: he he says stuff and laughs
- OC: and that's been resol, and that's been resolved
- Lt4: [] I managed to do it and it's going to take a while
- CSM: so what are we saying?
- 2ic: how does he rank against Warrant McNish
- OC: right, and that's the problem. Does Scopel go ahead of or behind McNish?
- CSM: I would think Warrant Scopel goes *behind* McNish. Uh uh, I'm going to be honest with yas, Sir, I shouldn't say it right here, I've had more complaints about you from him, but don't come to me and complain about it, go assist and direct and bring you up as a good captain down the road. Cut and dry.
- Lt4: Okay, say this
- CSM: don't come complain to me
- Lt4: Okay, sit down, let's talk about this.
- CSM: see what I just said?
- Lt4: say this again
- CSM: I have more complaints about a couple occasions on this last exercise about you
- Lt4: right
- CSM: where he shouldn't come complain to me, he should go up to you and talk to you and sort it out between yourselves and you know, sit and assist and direct you. You know what I'm saying

Lt4: he's been complaining to you?
 CSM: yes
 Lt4: about what, in particular?
 CSM: leaguer screw ups, uh on one occasion, uh when you should have dismounted the troops
 OC: I'll be right back, I got to piss real bad [leaves the room]
 CSM: why? don't bring them fucking problems to me, sit with him, see what I'm saying
 Lt4: he and I had it out, I'll give you that much,
 CSM: there you go
 Lt4: about his style and my style
 CSM: the CQ still has a better edge on him. The CQ would take you up outside, and he'll talk about something, where the CQ wouldn't come bring it up to my attention, see what I'm saying?
 Lt4: okay, but you're pulling a shock tactic right?
 CSM: no I'm not I just said I shouldn't have brought it up here
 Lt4: well you shouldn't have
 CSM: but I did because I'm honest to you and I'm honest to all the officers here
 Lt4: but to bring it up
 CSM: no, because I don't want to deal with problems like that, that's between you two, that's between platoon commander and platoon warrant stuff. I don't get involved with that stuff.
 Lt4: but why bring it up here, why bring it up here
 CSM: I had to. I had to bring it up
 Lt4: out of context
 CSM: yes it is, but the CQ would assist and direct you a little more, a little better than Warrant Scopel. Warrant Scopel's brand new, just come off his 6B, we have to place the CQ, I will not lower the CQ below Warrant Scopel. And the CQ's got a *lot* more knowledge.
 2ic: Sergeant Major, go have a smoke
 CSM: do you agree with that?
 Lt4: oof
 CSM: ya got to agree with it. Yes, Warrant Scopel's going to make it to the dizzy heights as a CQ, he's going to gain experience, uh. I might have opened up a can of worms here, but I had to do it
 Lt4: well, you just got to give me couple of seconds here to
 CSM: to suck back and reload, have a cigarette, probably, or you ready to start smoking now? or what?
 Lt5: [laughs]
 CSM: there's a lot of things that goes on in my door that youse don't know about
 Lt4: well, maybe this should be talked about before
 CSM: maybe I shouldn't have mentioned this
 Lt4: maybe this is too much exploding at once in one little room.
 CSM: the CQ would assist and direct you a lot more than Warrant Scopel, I'm going to tell you that straight, cut and dry, because the CQ has the experience
 Lt4: but now we're on merit list and I'm finding that I should

CSM: that's why I would not leave the room unless the CQ is above Warrant Scopel. And you don't drop a CQ. Technically, last year, actually, we were shot to shit, why the hell aren't you fighting for your CQ? I mean they're supposed to be number one Warrant. I was turning bright red, I can't, he doesn't sit up, he doesn't fit up there, uh you see what I'm saying?

OC: [re-entering the room] did we resolve anything here?

Lt4: no, what you missed was you know, just a bit of aggro here, cause he's dropping bombshells here to

CSM: no, I'm not dropping bombshells because

Lt4: no but it's bombshells to *me*

CSM: I'm loyal and I'm honest to all you, as as gentlemen and officers

OC: but you've talked to Warrant Scopel about the the concerns, so

CSM: yes, I've talked to him, I said well, hey you go and you train the platoon commander. Don't come to me with problems

Lt4: Why is that your ? He he came to me and he said, he had that meeting with you, he said you were fishing around for something about me, for some reason

CSM: I'm not fishing. I don't fish around. I get feedback and see how to better improve and lead lead the company. I look more at morale. I concentrate more on morale problems, okay?

OC: but you know, we want to be careful here, because I heard the comment before I left, and I think I understand what's happened here. Warrant Scopel, because he's a bit junior, may have gone to the Sergeant Major about concerns and you sent him back, uh, but that's that's perhaps to be expected, you know, so that's no it's not because. You know what I'm saying? I don't *think* you want to think Warrant Scopel any *less* of a warrant because of that. I mean that's normal for a warrant to talk to his Sergeant Major about his concerns, even if you do bounce them back.

CSM: yeah, that's why I shouldn't have mentioned it here

2ic: it's not to be taken as him going behind your back, necessarily,

OC: that's the way it's supposed to work, that's the way it's supposed to work, Mike,

Lt4: I'm getting two different stories, so I just got to find a happy medium between what he's telling me and what you're telling me

OC: but, Mike, that's always what goes on, okay? it's gone on with this platoon and it's gone on with that platoon, that goes on, and that's the way it's *supposed* to work

CSM: he's up there alone, I'm up there alone. um, yes there's a line between them and me, and there's a line between the platoon commanders and the 2ic and him.

Lt4: okay, yeah, but just put yourself in my shoes for a second. Here I am fighting for the guy and you say fuck he did this

CSM: I'm not saying that, no

Lt4: you just deflated my balloon

CSM: but the thing is though

Lt4: that's what happened, essentially

CSM: I just want the CQ as number three

Lt4: sure, put him tenth now

[laughter]

Lt4: you know, that's the way I feel,

[laughter]

CSM: maybe I wanted to sum everything up very shortly and
Lt4: well, hey, touché, well done, cause you took me down
[laughter]
Lt4: you got the last word
CSM: I could have put it in different words, but I put it straight point blank and called a
spade a spade
Lt5: is this done?
OC: all right, so let's put down CQ and Scopel
CSM: do you agree on that four platoon? now?
Lt4: yeah, sure
CSM: he's going to make a CQ, he's got a lot of time to learn, he's got a lot of experience
to gain. Uh he's going to come up, in time. You would benefit more with the CQ
assisting and directing you, than Warrant Scopel.
Lt4: okay, let me ask you this. If you see problems with this Warrant, maybe I'd
benefit with another warrant, why don't we just change him, or
CSM: no, because there's every there's always a strong and a weak one
Lt4: I'm not sure I'm just asking
OC: Warrant Scopel is still there
Lt4: pardon me, Sir?
OC: Scopel is still there
Lt4: okay, and I'm still learning
OC: so I think, I think, you're getting upset,
Lt4: I'm taking this personally no
OC: you're getting upset over something that's entirely normal
2ic: yeah
OC: so, uh, you shouldn't
CSM: I had to call a spade a spade here, that's why I wouldn't leave the room, we'd be
here till midnight
OC: okay, that's it guys, good heated debate, it usually is like this.
