

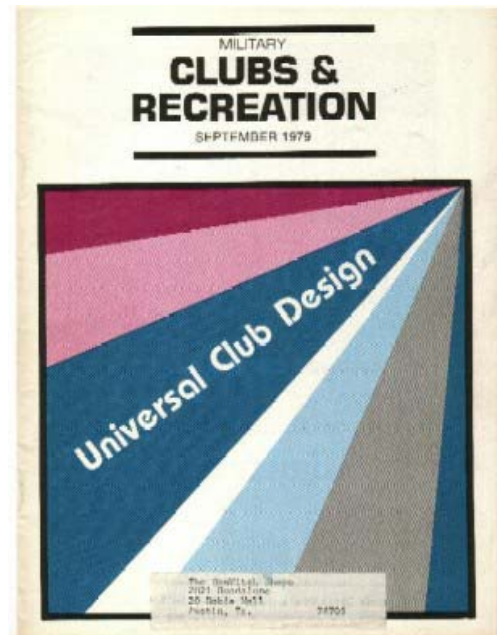
The Chair

Have you ever wanted one of those really expensive, fancy office chairs?

In this entertaining true story, Kent tells how he justified the expense.

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by **Kent Cummins**
Contributing Editor



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Buy the biggest, fanciest office chair you can find! That's what I did when I was Club Officer of the Fort Dix Officers' Club, and the Junior Officers' Council has never recovered . . . but that chair paid for itself again and again.

I am reminded of "The Chair" by Gasser Chair Company ads in Military CLUBS & RECREATION. The beautiful, full-color, full-page ads each show an exquisite chair, with the caption: "Only if you want the finest." And the chair looks so much like my controversial desk chair at Fort Dix, that I decided the time had come to tell the story.

It all started back in December, 1969, when I was an Army Captain, assigned to the Fort Dix, New Jersey Officers Club as the Club Manager (Actually it was the "FDOOM: Fort Dix Officers Open Mess," and I was the "Secretary! Custodian," but let's use the current terminology.)

I had completed the Army Open Mess (Club) Management Course and the Quartermaster Officers' Advanced Course at Fort Lee, Virginia, and had previous experience with clubs in Germany, France, and Vietnam. Unfortunately, I must have looked like a brand-new second lieutenant, because the combat arms colonels at the Infantry Training Center didn't really take their new, young, Quartermaster club officer seriously.

To make matters worse, there had been several *untrained* club officers succeeding each other (but not succeeding at the job) during the previous year. As a result, the "FDOOM" was at a low point of member confidence and participation.

One bright spot was the Club Steward, SFC Laurence Benevento. As young and inexperienced as I must have looked, that's how mature and experienced "Sgt Ben" was. Here was an NCO with a wealth of experience and loyalty, but most important a real "CAN DO" attitude. And one of his first ideas was to improve the professional image of his boss!

"Sir," began Sgt Ben, "Your office looks terrible, and you look like a kid! Somehow, we've got to let people know that you're a qualified club manager.

We kicked around several ideas, including a better "uniform" (he found a store that specialized in club blazers), publicity (the post newspaper ran a "new club officer" article, emphasizing my experience and professional training), and an improved office environment (that's where the chair comes in!).

The old office was a case study in government hodge-podge, with two typical military desks, two typical military desk chairs, and a too-typical military clutter. The place was a mess! Salesmen, club members, employees, family, and friends were constantly streaming in and out.

The previous club officer had told me, confidentially, that the only time he got any work done was when he was at home.

It took us just about a week to turn the office around (not to mention inside out!). First, we yanked everything out and thoroughly cleaned everything. The walls got fresh paint; a carpet remnant was installed on the floor; some inexpensive drapes were purchased from Sears; a few lamps, a sofa, a coffee table and a couple of chairs were signed out from the Family Housing Office.

Sgt Ben found a bunch of old wooden frames, and we framed every certificate I'd ever received..., creating an impressive wall display behind my desk. Oh yes, we moved the other desk, typewriter, and extraneous files into the outer office with the secretary, so that there was room for a more pleasant arrangement of furniture in the inner office.

Club Executive and other hospitality magazines and reference books were organized into an attractive (but inexpensive) bookcase (from K-Mart!) behind my desk, A few live plants were added, and lighting was improved.

My desk, an old gray metal monster from somebody's Army property book, was "born again" through wood-grained Contac paper and gold paint into what looked like a real executive desk... yet with negligible expense.

So far, the conversion of the office had been accomplished through self-help and petty cash. We sat down, looked around, and were quite pleased with what we had done.

It was Sgt Ben who broke the mood. "Sir," he said, looking at my old gray military desk chair, "you need a better chair!" I agreed with him in theory, but didn't consider it a big deal. In fact, I had forgotten all about it when Sgt Ben came into the office a few days later and asked me to get out of my chair.

As I watched, a couple of delivery men wheeled in the biggest, most impressive desk chair I had ever seen. It was solid black, tufted leather with chrome fittings, silent swivel and rocker action, and ball-bearing casters. It was impressive. It was imposing. It was incredible!

I was almost afraid to sit down in The Chair, and when I finally succumbed, I felt an immediate surge of pleasure—prestige—and power that's impossible to describe. SHAZAM! A mild-mannered club officer had turned into the World's Mightiest Manager!

How much did The Chair cost?

If I remember correctly, it was over \$200— and that was more than 10 years ago, at a special military discount negotiated by Sgt Ben! I do know that The Chair cost more than the rest of the office renovation combined—it was the one item which we had not "scrounged" or repaired through self-help.

The Chair became a focal point of the new office. It also became a formal complaint to the Commanding General by the Junior Officers' Council!

I suppose professional jealousy was actually at the root of the complaint. Why should one Captain (and a “support troop” and that) have a better-looking office than an Infantry Company Commander?

Why indeed? It can best be explained by an understanding of the difference in mission of the two jobs

The infantry leader’s mission is to close with the enemy by means of fire and maneuver, and capture or destroy him. In other words, “Charge that hill!” (I was an infantry platoon leader for two years.)

The Club Manager’s mission, on the other hand, is to satisfy the dining, social, and recreational needs of the military community. In other words, “Serve that meal!” Different training, different skills, and a *different environment*.

The military image is important in a tactical unit. The uniform, the haircut, military bearing, and discipline are all vital ingredients in building the esprit de corps essential for a dangerous mission. But are these the same ingredients necessary for promoting an evening of dinner theatre?

In the military club, the traditional military image is virtually antithetical to the mission. After long, hard days of rigorous training, the military man (and, increasingly, the military woman) wants to relax and *get away from* the daily grind. This means good food, excellent service, comfortable atmosphere... in short, *hospitality*. And this atmosphere should be designed to let him forget the military establishment for a short while.

I’ll never forget the mezzanine to the ballroom at the Fort Lee Officers Club: an imposing hall of portraits of former post commanders, staring at every customer on his or her way to dine. It would have been equally effective to require all members to come to the club in uniform!

But I digress. The point I was making is that the infantry leader’s office should be sparse, rugged, and “gung ho” to reflect his mission. The Club Manager’s office, on the other hand, should be plush, relaxing, and businesslike...to reflect his mission.

Now that I’ve thoroughly rationalized the requirements for a sumptuous office as opposed to a dump, let’s get back to the story at Fort Dix. How effective was the new office?

Obviously, the new office was more attractive and better organized than it was previously. I can remember many examples of situations in which the new office made an important difference in what happened.

One day a liquor salesman, who was in the habit of barging in whenever he pleased, came pushing into the office shortly after the remodeling. He took one look around, excused himself, and went back out into the outer office, where he asked my secretary to notify me that he would like to talk to me! *It really happened!*

A colonel and his wife came in to book a catering job. Because of the comfortable atmosphere, they took time to browse through our catering book. And because it looked *like I was a professional*, they had the confidence to accept my suggestions in completing the contract. Before one year was completed, we had accumulated literally *dozens* of letters of appreciation for our catering jobs. And they all started in the office, with me sitting in The Chair!

An employee came in with a complaint. Instead of ranting and raving he sat down and discussed the problem rationally. The “mood” of the office is what made the difference. (The guy in The Chair is obviously The Boss.)

The President of the Board of Governors (today it would be Chairman of the Advisory Council) came in to tell me how to run the club. Amazingly, he sat down and discussed the situation, man to man. He *listened to my ideas*, because the atmosphere of the office communicated a clear message: “This guy is *a professional* club manager.”

There are many more examples, but suffice it to say that the Commanding General, after investigating our total expenditures for the new office and the resulting improvement in our mission, agreed with our rationale. The Chair was approved. 🌟