

# INFORMATION FROM THE HIGHEST QUARTERS

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We would think it rather odd if someone said "Follow me, please, I'll show you to your thirds". It would sound perfectly normal, however, if the statement was "Follow me, please, I'll show you to your quarters".

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, there are 42 different meanings of the word "quarters". The one that has intrigued this writer is the meaning in the sense of lodgings or accommodations. I can't put a date on it, but clearly at one time it was the custom, especially in the military, to divide a camp or facility into four parts, or quarters. (If Julius Caesar had been writing this article he might have entitled it "Omnes Loci in Quattuor Partes Divisi Sunt".) What might these four divisions have been? Based on little more than conjecture and the terminology itself, I hazard a guess that they were:

1. The Headquarters, for higher-level administrative officials, military bureaucrats, staff officers and the like.
2. The Officers' Quarter(s), for themselves and sometimes their families.
3. The Quarter(s) for the common soldiers and sometimes their families.
4. The Quarter(s) for storing material, equipment, ordnance, supplies, food, etc. The person in charge would be the Quartermaster General, under whom would be a number of subordinate personnel, most notably the Quartermaster Sergeant. Well-known to those familiar with the US military is the Quartermaster Corps, the branch of the service having special responsibility for items such as those listed.

It may have been the case that originally the division by area was into four equal parts--which, of course, is the orthodox meaning of quarters. As time progressed, however, it would seem that as in Orwell's *Animal Farm*, some quarters were seen to be of greater importance than others, and so were be granted more space--thus making it a matter of four unequal parts (which technically means that they are no longer "quarters").

Grammatically, of course, if one were to have four equal quarters, each one would be a "quarter" (in the singular). In practice, however, popular usage has resulted in the plural being applied, so that it has now become more common to speak of quarters as in "Yes, sir, let me show you to your quarters". A relevant aside here is that "lodgings" too is usually referred to in the plural. At the present time, the quarter (in the singular) that is probably best known is Paris's Latin Quarter; another, of course, is the French Quarter in New Orleans.



Following up on the theme that we have lost the sense of quarters consisting of four equal parts, a recent case in point that caught my attention was the publication in February 1996 by the National Geographic Society of a historical map of Jerusalem. I noted with interest that in the 12th century the city was divided into five quarters: the Armenian Quarter, the German Quarter, the Hospitaller's Quarter, the Patriarch's Quarter, the Syrian Quarter. The previous arrangement had been the Christian Quarter, the Muslim Quarter, the Jewish Quarter and a second Jewish Quarter. (In this case, two quarters do not equal a half!)

The quarter that seems to have had the greatest impact and made a mark for itself internationally is "headquarters". This term is used in business, commerce and industry, as in "The world headquarters of the United Nations is in New York City" or "The headquarters of the Coca-Cola Company is in Atlanta".

Well-known in days of yore was the "beat to quarters", a drumroll to signify that all ranks should proceed immediately to their assigned areas. This is related to the word "tattoo" (as in a military tattoo), which comes to us from the Dutch "tap toe" (tap close, i.e., close the beer or ale taps in a tavern or pub). This again was a drumroll, indicating that it was time to go to quarters.

An interesting semantic development has been the idea that captured prisoners of war would be assigned to a military detention area. In so doing they were being provided "living quarters"--granted "quarter". In the event that a decision was made (as in the case of the Alamo) that all captured soldiers were to be put to death, there would then be "no quarter" given. Thus, the top-level determination as to "quarter" or "no quarter" made the difference as to whether captives would be granted clemency or would forfeit their lives.

As I conclude this article and wonder whether or not it will be accepted for publication in Word Ways, I can anticipate that when the decision has been made I will receive the information from the highest quarters (the editor). This raises the question: Does anyone ever receive information from the lowest quarters?

Enough already! It's time to get up off my hindquarters!