



# The Rope

## USAF Enlisted Aide Newsletter

Issue 6: Supplemental Editorial

### Reflection: How to Succeed as an Aide

By MSgt Thad Payne



I think back to my first Aide position as the Junior Enlisted Aide to the PACAF Commander (circa 1995) and knowing what I know now

about the special duty, I was headed for disaster for several reasons.

Frankly, I was surprised that I lasted 9 months before I went in and asked the General to release me from the special duty. I told my General that it was time for me to return to my original career field before I started slipping in the quality of service I provided. He graciously agreed and told me that this job wasn't for everyone and he completely understood. He was very supportive, understanding and kind. I have always admired and respected him for that. It was the toughest thing I have ever done in 20 years of service to our Air Force – being the consummate professional and to quit my job. I swore then that I would never perform this special duty again (never say never)! Since that first job, I have worked for 5 General Officers and their Spouses at various levels of command. I guess the reasons for my departure from the field were many, both personal and professional. I pictured it to be all dinner parties and traveling. Glamorous you might say or at least that is how the special duty was sold to me. There was zero training provided and only a small inadequate handbook listing about 5

things we should never be asked to do as an Aide. I was also intimidated and afraid to use my voice, respectfully, when it came to communicating with the rest of the team (General, Spouse and Senior Enlisted Aide). Truthfully, I felt like nothing more than an overpaid housekeeper. Since that first job nearly 14 years ago with over 10 years of experience and coming up on my 6<sup>th</sup> Aide position, I have certainly found my voice and realized what it takes to be successful as an Aide.

Each Aide position I have filled has helped me to grow both professionally and personally. I owe that to each of the Generals, spouses and the rest of the team – for that I am grateful. My experience working as an Enlisted Aide has brought me to where I am today and I am extremely passionate about what it takes to be successful as an Enlisted Aide. It is my duty to make sure newly assigned Aides do not stumble as I did. I welcome the opportunity to share some of my observations. They are not in any order of importance and are equal contributors to success in our special duty.

Newly assigned Enlisted Aides are provided with so many wonderful training opportunities and mentoring from Senior Aides that their success rate should be at an all time high. But unfortunately, my observations tell me otherwise. There are several contributing factors to why new Aides may not be successful and have to go through that same tough time that I did back in 1995. One factor is that this special duty is being sold to them as

the “glamorous” job that I first thought. We as members of this special duty need to be selling it honestly and if we are not, then shame on us. As with all jobs there are areas that we really enjoy and areas that we dislike. When we market this duty, we owe it to potential applicants to be as honest and up front with all responsibilities. The good, the bad and the ugly...

Another factor is the interview. It should be conducted face-to-face (never via telephone) and all expectations or duties should be laid out clearly from both sides of the table. Part of the interview should include a trial period in the quarters for a minimum of 4 to 6 weeks or enough time to get over the “polite” stage in the relationship (our assignment process being what it is, this is not always possible). Newly assigned Aides must be given the opportunity to learn and grow. Yes they will make mistakes along the way, but they will be stronger Aides for it.

Training is yet another factor – all team members must support every opportunity and take full advantage of it – no Aide should ever go into a job without the basic tools to succeed. These tools come only from training like MAJCOM Orientation with a Senior Aide or any of our offered household management/culinary courses within our three tiered training outline.

Communication - the vast majority of issues that we face in this duty are

communication related. I use the term “we” and mean to include all of the team (the Aide, the General and the Spouse). Why is it so hard to communicate in this duty? Enlisted Aides should be able to communicate professionally, respectfully and directly with their Generals & spouses. In the same regard, the Aide should receive direct communication from the General and spouse without taking it personally. I am reminded of a time when a spouse was uncomfortable telling me something, but I could tell that something was troubling her and you could have cut the tension in the house with a knife. I felt so uncomfortable, but I managed to summon up my respectful voice and ask point blank, “Ma’am, what is wrong, we need to keep the lines of communication open and I can surely tell that something is on your mind” – she felt my sincerity and shared what was on her mind. It was then I realized just how important communication was. In the relationship from that point on, we always kept the lines of communication open and knew that we were both mature enough to not harbor any bad feelings towards each other over whatever the issue was. We got it out in the open, learned from it and moved on. I also gained a wife’s perspective from that same spouse – keep in mind that being an Aide is a unique position, in that you will work in someone’s home, with their personal belongings (great grandma’s gravy boat) and this can be stressful on the household, who may or may not have experience with professional help in her home or her kitchen before. She may have mixed feelings – great appreciation for the very expert help, but also a sense of loss of privacy and her personal space. A great Aide is sensitive to these types of feelings and recognizes he or she is in a position of

intimacy with their employer. I have recently had the benefit of several spouses sharing with me just how uncomfortable they are giving direction to their Aide for fear of hurting their feelings or overstepping what they perceive to be their acceptable boundaries. It’s the Aides duty to make the spouses feel comfortable in coming forward with their desires, requirements and needs. It is also the Aides duty to never judge.

**Genuine Relationship** - without the genuine relationship, the team is destined for failure. The Aide must feel like a valued member on the General’s staff and respected as a person. I’m not saying that the Aide has to be a member of the family, but treated as an asset and not just an overpaid housekeeper, respected for their value and contributions to the success of the tour. The relationship must flow in both directions – the Aide must also respect the value and contributions of the General and spouse as well. After all, it is not their place to judge how and why the General and spouse choose to live, but rather to support them with respect and care. The Aide must be professional and discreet in regards to all activities within the quarters. The Aide must remember they are NCOs and Airmen first!

**Teamwork** - the Aide must be a team player. This means in the quarters, as well as the office and base. Build a genuine relationship with the General’s office and staff. Build that relationship by helping protocol, the club or the “front office” during events when they may be short staffed. The benefit of this teamwork will be networking and will pay huge dividends along the way. Enlisted Aides should also strive for teamwork among their fellow Aides. Nobody

understands our duties better than we do.

**Professionalism** – never forget that the circle of senior officers within the Air Force is a small circle, and your reputation will be well known among those who will decide whether to hire you or not in the future. Even after retirement, officers and their spouses will be asked about the Aides who worked for them. Your casual, offhand comment to one spouse at a function, or lack of professionalism is ALWAYS noticed by someone, and perhaps passed on in the future. Your professional attitude and integrity never goes off duty.

These pillars (marketing, interviewing, training, communication, genuine relationship, teamwork and professionalism) are equally important and should serve as the foundation for building a successful Enlisted Aide. A successful Aide can take pride in their work knowing that it is tough, diverse and sometimes exhausting...but such an incredibly valuable contribution to the massive job a General is doing. It’s a direct contribution to the success of the USAF and every Aide should remember that they are “boots on the ground,” just as much as any other special duty! I am a firm believer that we owe it to our special duty to make it as successful as possible and to set our future generations of Aides up for success. I would like to thank all the Generals, spouses, and fellow Aides for mentoring me throughout my tenure. I couldn’t have survived without your patience and guidance!



## Newsletter Inputs

Please submit your newsletter supplemental articles to “The Rope” Newsletter editor: TSgt Emily Popkoski at [emily.popkoski@warren.af.mil](mailto:emily.popkoski@warren.af.mil)