



The Wheelbook

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SWO Rule: There is no such thing as impossible!

Success as a Flag Aide

by LT Jon Paris

Flag Aide/Flag LT duty is challenging and often thankless. It is fast paced, grueling, offers unique insights, and is assigned to only the most competitive individuals due to the sensitivity and profile of the position. If you are interested in being a Flag Aide/Flag LT, start your research early. The NPC website has a wealth of information, to include what jobs will be opening and when. Talk with aides currently in the job, recently former aides, and members of your chain-of-command who served as aides - their perspectives and war stories will be invaluable. Ensure that your detailer knows of your desire to pursue aide duty and be proactive with them by spot-checking your own record and lining up future billets with your respective timeline and current chain of command. The first step is a hurdle of its own: getting nominated by your community.

The Interview

Up until now, it is unlikely that you have ever had a one-on-one conversation with a Flag Officer, much less a private closed-door meeting. Do not despair – even the most abrasive Flags handle interviews in a cordial and relatively informal manner. You will quite literally have a conversation with the Flag. Though there is lore about the myriad of questions a Flag might ask, you are far more likely to hear “*Tell me about yourself*” than, “*What is the last book you read and what did it teach you?*” While follow-on questions might include your reasons for wanting to be an aide (have an answer, and be honest) or your career goals, the thrust of the conversation will be aimed at getting to know you. There is not much you can do to prepare for this part, other than telling yourself to overcome your nerves and to be yourself. The admiral’s aide will work more closely with him than any other person on his staff or in the command. The aide will spend long hours with him, both at work and on travel, will know details of his private and professional life usually reserved for family, and will be entrusted with keeping him on track, successful, and most importantly, out of trouble. The relationship is often described as a “marriage,” and thus, trivia during an interview is rarely – if ever – used to decide who gets hired. The person who gets hired will be the person that the admiral “clicked” with the most.

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Turnover

Just as with any other job in the Navy, aide turnover has no set timeline. Some new aides may get two days, while others may get two or more weeks. It is important to communicate early with the person who you will be relieving to determine this timeline. Out of respect for the position – which you will understand at the end of your tour – it is important to flex to the outgoing aide's timeline as much as possible.

Prior to your PCS, ensure you have serviceable pairs of every uniform; as an aide, you will always match the boss' uniform, and often times junior officers do not own every uniform that senior officers do at this point in their careers. Organizational uniforms – like flight suits – will be acquired after you start your job. Before you transfer, make sure your security clearance is up-to-date and start the process for upgraded clearances, as required. Upon arrival at your new command, complete all administrative requirements prior to jumping into the new job. Once you start your turnover – and certainly once you are in the job – you will have minimal personal time, so it pays to get everything done out front. The best way to learn the job is to shadow your predecessor, and ask every question that pops into your brain along the way. Your predecessor will not mind – they are protective of their boss and will want you to uphold the high standards they are leaving behind. Often times you will learn more just by watching and listening to the daily rhythm than you will from taking notes. Ensure you master your command's Battle Rhythm, and that of your boss' immediate superior. When does your boss like to have executive time, how long does he like for lunch and PT, when is the commander's update brief and what periodic briefs must your boss prepare for *his* boss? Once you take charge, you are the go-to person for the admiral and for the staff, and you must know the answer on the spot.

Pay special attention to the various logs that the aide must keep, the methods to planning trips and the rules that govern them, and to the VCNO Ethics Guidance released annually. The Ethics Guidance is your governing instruction – much like a NAVDORM or EDORM. You must know it cold. Before officially taking the loop, spend dedicated time with your Staff Judge Advocate, with whom you will work closely during the duration of your tour.

The Football

The Football, or your aide briefcase, will be your go-to took-kit, your mobile filing cabinet, your in-hand uniform store, and often, your own personal transport bag. Keep it stocked and ready to go at all times – whether you are attending a re-occurring brief, a local event or heading off on a cross-country trip. Every aide is different and every boss has different habits, but some basic stores should include: business cards for both you and your boss, a collection of pens and highlighters, notebooks or notecards, command coins, pain reliever, breath freshener, phone chargers, stain remover, hand wipes/napkins, re-occurring briefs/presentations as well as timely briefs/presentations, clasps (froggies), reading material, and your admiral's stationary/cards and envelopes. Before any trip that takes you away from home-guard, ensure you stock (or re-stock) your staple items as well as any trip specific items (car GPS, contact lenses/glasses, extra coins, or uniform items that may be hard to acquire at your destination).

Day-to-Day

While the Chief of Staff (CoS) runs the command's staff, as the aide, you are often the leader of the Flag's personal staff. It is true that some staffs may have unique dynamics, and even other members who are senior in rank, but you work directly for the admiral and there is no other person who will have his pulse better than you. Each staff operates a little differently; ascertain how your staff works and, within reason, make adjustments based on your personality and habits and those of your boss.

No matter how you choose to delegate the various responsibilities, *you own the admiral's calendar*. You must actively manage and de-conflict it, as well as prioritize it and safe-guard it. You must know what he is doing next Tuesday and be able to recite his next several trips. You will most often decide what meetings will bump others off of the calendar and must be both firm and diplomatic handling the notifications and fall-out. Often times it is efficient to delegate short term items while you focus on the big picture or long term planning; regardless, you are responsible for it all.

The aide is the admiral's gate-keeper. In general, only the Deputy, the CoS, and members of the personal staff have walk-in privileges. Your boss' time is valuable. While many in the command may feel like their pressing issue of the day will be of the utmost interest to the boss, you must stand-fast and protect the admiral's time. Judgment calls will often have to be made on the spot as to

whether you let a drive-by into the office, whether you schedule them for a later meeting, or whether you personally take their issue to brief the admiral at a more convenient time. You will always be junior to the individuals trying to gain time with the admiral – it is important that you establish yourself early as firm but fair and that you lay out procedures you expect people to adhere to. While you must strive not to burn bridges, you must always fiercely protect the boss’ time – he relies on you to ensure he has time to get the important – and/or timely – stuff done.

You are responsible for ensuring that the boss is “smart” about the various subjects that may come up during a given day or meeting or series of briefs. Establish a policy that requires read-aheads from in-house personnel 24-48 hours ahead of a respective meeting. Strategically pursue read-aheads from outside the life-lines. Whether the read-aheads are copies of briefs, memos, white papers, biographies, or talking points, they are most certainly critical. They allow your boss to speak intelligently about a particular topic or person; you never want your boss to be caught off-guard or uninformed.

While delays in your in-house schedule are inevitable and often trickle down throughout a given day, you are the conductor and must do your best to keep the trains running on time. Your boss must always be on time when attending a meeting or event outside of the command. They must always be in the appropriate uniform, must know exactly where to go when they get to the event, who they will be seeing at the event, and what their role is when they get there (especially if they will or might be speaking). Dogged research, reconnaissance, triple-checking, tenacity, and savvy are required to bring all of these pieces together; achieving this part of the job will eventually become routine, but is a hallmark of the aide’s duties.

Do not be scared to walk into the admiral’s office throughout the day. You will cycle in and out admin, pop in to ask a question, and will be called into the office a dozen times a day. You are the admiral’s right-hand person, and though you must always respect the rank and position, you will have a much more familiar relationship with the Flag than any other person outside of his family. You must be accessible, you must be knowledgeable (to include knowing right where to go for an answer), you must be prepared to give your opinion or to give the boss the pulse of the deck plates, you must be personable, and you must be proactive.

You will interact with the admiral’s family and will be privy to his most private details. Ensure you know what you legally can and cannot do for his

family, as delineated in the ethics guidance and reinforced by your SJA. Though it may not seem obvious, you will make life easier for you and for your boss if you keep an eye out for conflicts between his personal and professional schedules. Keep the admiral's spouse informed – they are often not read-into the future planning taking place at the office and giving them an appropriate “heads-up,” as well as simply keeping them involved in their spouse's life, will go a long way. While not specific to dealing with his family, your absolute discretion is a must. Whether dealing with issues related to his private life, or encountering command or “Big Navy” details while in company with the boss, you are trusted to keep things contained at the appropriate level – no matter if the information is classified, or not.

Do not let your boss approach ethical or legal gray areas. Establish an impressive world-wide network of contacts. Know how to sweet talk your way into a short-notice briefing with CNO, when your boss' boss has time on his schedule next Thursday, and who to talk protocol with in Japan. Your boss will be thinking at the 50,000 foot level all the time and will have 30 years of Navy knowledge bottled up, so they will simply expect you to have the answer to a question or to be able to find “Tom” at a certain command. Throughout the days and weeks and years in your job, you will be tying together a complicated web of highly-visible and important events; make it all look seamless, and do not bemoan how “challenging” something was. Just do it – you will be amazed at the things you will accomplish when there is “no such thing as impossible.”

Planning and Executing Trips

Though you might consider yourself a world traveler who is used to booking your tickets or packing a bag and jumping onto the open road, trips for and/or with the admiral are a little bit more complicated. Planning for a trip starts with the initial tasker, which will come from your boss expressing a desire, your boss being invited to an event, or your boss being directed to attend a meeting or briefing.

After you receive such a tasker, you must flesh out the details of the trip – from both subject matter experts in the command, as well as your event point of contact. Once you have the respective details, you must then put a package together for your Staff Judge Advocate to review, including: agendas, accompanying personnel, mission critical justifications, and cost estimates. Your SJA will review your material and will make an official recommendation as to whether the trip passes the basic legal “sniff test,” allowing you to further submit appropriate written requests to your boss' immediate superior for their approval,

modification, or disapproval. The entire approval process is clearly delineated and strictly adhered to.

Once you receive approval, you may start to actively plan the trip. Before determining the “when” and “how” of your travel, you must first fit all of the pieces of the trip together. When do you wish to start and end each day? What meetings or events will your boss attend and in what order? How long will he need at each event and how long will it take to get to the next? Will he need executive time (and an office), time to change uniforms, PT time, or personal time? When is the earliest he can leave home-guard and when is the latest that he can return? Will leave be taken in conjunction with the trip? The answers to many of these questions are achieved through in-depth coordination with other commands and staffs. Once you have your answers, you may plan the physical travel – whether that be via POV, GOV, or air. Ensure that you are following proper guidance from the applicable instructions and manuals when scheduling commercial transportation or planning to use government vehicles. Once you have your plans in order, present them to the SJA for a final review, prior to locking them in.

The week before your trip, start constructing the admiral’s trip-book. Divide the book appropriately. Start with any associated reservations – air, rental car, and lodging. Then include a copy of his orders. Follow that with a section for event information, to include your hand-crafted day-by-day agenda, points of contact for each event and for homeguard, event programs, invitations, announcements, or copies of his speech (as applicable). Next, include a section of read-ahead material with associated briefs, talking points, memos, personal notes, and biographies of every FOGO/SES or other important person he will interact with in the appropriate order of their appearance during the trip. Finish the book off with area/installation/building maps and directions. This last part will require some effort on your part ahead of time, and as able, usually dry runs once on deck at your destination. You never want to get lost or be “finding your way” when getting the admiral from point A to B – regardless of whether you personally have ever been to the base, city, ship, or country. You will not accompany the admiral on every trip; for those trips, ensure your maps and directions are particularly explicit. Once you have completed the admiral’s book, copy every page, add your own reservations, make your own book, and email yourself your agenda with points of contact. Before the day of the trip arrives, determine how your boss will pack (small bag, large bag, checked bag, carry-on) and match him.

On the day of the trip, ensure you *and your boss* get on the road or arrive at the airport with time to spare. Travel will either be in uniform or conservative business casual attire. You are representing the government when you travel, so ensure that you carry yourself appropriately. Check-in regularly with home-guard and keep them apprised of your progress; you may also find yourself leaning on them for pop-up questions that arise as you travel – take special notice of time differences when considering this aspect and plan accordingly. When on deck at your destination, be equally prepared to spend any unscheduled time on your own (a good time to rest or to meet up with past shipmates) or socializing with your boss. Pack appropriately and be ready to support whatever the boss needs or wants. As his aide, you are not there to get a free trip – you are there to support the boss and the mission. In the evening, study the next day’s events, locations, schedule, and points of contact – your boss will expect you guys to hit the ground running first thing.

Wrapping Up

To the best of your ability, always arrive at work before your boss and leave work after them. While maintaining your honor, courage, and commitment, ensure that you are looking out for your boss – you are their sanity check for almost everything and you are the expert on the regulations. Keep them fair in the channel and on task. Ensure that they know people’s names and details and that they recognize members who are due. Keep an eye out for their personal appearance – whether it is messed up hair or a flipped collar or a crooked warfare pin, and ensure you are immaculate, as well. Walk to the admiral’s left, know when you should excuse yourself from a room or conversation, know how to make yourself silent or invisible in the presence of senior personnel, and be prepared to enthusiastically tackle any imaginable off-the-wall question or tasker that will undoubtedly fly out of the admiral’s office when you least expect it. After you determine your personal work rhythm, attempt to attend any and all briefs that your boss does – one of the perks of being an aide is gaining unique insight for someone of your paygrade. You will be amazed at what you will learn. You will also be better prepared to schedule future events for your boss. Remember that you represent your Flag Officer – and his command or organization – wherever you go, and when people see your loop, they expect perfection. Do your very best to live up to this expectation daily and remind yourself that *there is no such thing as impossible*.