

## Ep. 2: Enlisted Promotions

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Welcome to the Sword and Shield podcast, episode two. June 25th, 2020. Today's topic is going to be Enlisted Promotions. I'm Colonel Rick Erredge, 960th Cyberspace Wing vice commander. With me today, I have Chief Howard, and we're going to talk about enlisted promotions. And we're really excited to be able to talk to this. We get a lot of questions. Sometimes it can be confusing, and chiefs here try to help us walk through what it looks like. - Awesome, sir. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to be here today. This is Chief Howard. I'm the acting command chief and the 960th cyber operations group superintendent. Kind of wanted to break down some questions here. Did you have a couple of questions that we want to walk through or do you want me to go ahead and just step through the airmen tier? - I think I'll try to ask some questions, and based on some feedback we received from the HappyOrNot Survey the last UTA, there was a number of themes that emerged from our feedback on our comments. We won't talk about specific comments, but I will talk about some themes, and I think they fit nicely into kind in question-answer session interview. We'll try this method for this edition. And so some of the themes that we're going to talk to today, and some of it is based on probably some facts and experiences some of our airmen have and the differences of coming off regular Air Force units. There's some confusion there, so we're going to try to separate that for folks and help you understand where you can get that information. And talk to some of those perceptions people have too about politics and about who is actually making the decisions. And it is much different than even the guarding regular Air Force. - Sure. I can now break down some of those differences for sure, especially when we talk about the airmen tier. - Okay, excellent. Well, let's get started. I think the first thing maybe to address is, what would you tell young a airman who's joining the Air Force Reserve maybe for the first time or maybe coming from one of the other components about what our promotion system looks like overall? - Okay, definitely. So obviously we follow AFI 36-2502, and then the reserves specific is chapter eight. The biggest difference for a reservist versus a traditional regular Air Force member, in the airman tiers specifically is it seems automatic, right? It's in the system. Those promotions happen almost instantaneously because of the way the system's built. Within the reserves, we have the same requirements and the same timelines. The only difference is that it requires some pushing of paperwork internally to our process. So the unit still has to push for the promotion. The documentation has to be routed through CSS. And then that actually then drives the promotion versus bringing that forward. It's already set in the system itself and then produces a projection and allows airman to know. So going from E1 to E2, so going

from airman basic to airman, you're looking at six months time in grade as an E1, and time in grade begins with the members entering of initial active duty time, right, so when you go to BMT. Then going into E2 to E3 or airman to airmen first-class. Again, six months time in grade as an E2, and time in grade begins when the member enters again, initial active duty time. Then senior airman, we have a little bit of a change up in some of those requirements, not just time. But there's a three-skill level in a primary Air Force specialty code or a PAFSC, which means that we've finished tech school, we've started up our upgrade training. We may have completed some CDCs. You also need one year of satisfactory service. So for some reason, you didn't participate or you have a bad year, that's a problem there. That's actually a piece that I'd like to highlight real quick is that at any rank, for any promotion, you would have a problem if you had an unexcused absence within the last 12 months. That's another thing within the reserves, right? Additionally, kind of going back into the promotion to senior airman, talk about skill level, the one-year satisfactory service, but also eight months time in grade as an E3 before being promoted. Again, all starting with those times and grades with your initial active duty time, sir. - Excellent. So what's a supervisor's role for an airman promotion? - Supervisor's role is going to be very engaged where they should be breaking down what those timelines are with the airmen. The supervisors should be setting some expectations as well. Just because there's a time in grade requirement doesn't mean that once you meet that time in grade is necessarily the right time for you. If you're not developing, if you're not performing or if there's some other disciplinary issues, then sometimes the squadron commander can take the recommendation of the supervisor to hold on that rank for a short period of time. But with that, there should be some mentorship happening with the supervisor. The supervisor explaining, "Okay, here's the things that we're looking at. Here are the things that we'd like to see improvement and build a plan with the airmen. This is what I'd like to see over the next two to three months." Usually we use months based on the fact that UTAS are one month after the next month. And when we use those terms like three months, it seems like a big time. When we're looking at it from a drill perspective, it is only a few days of actual hands on growth. But we have to set those expectations. We have to set a plan forward as a supervisor to our airmen so that they know what that expectation is, and then we give them the chance to grow and develop and move forward, right? It's not meant to be a hindrance, it's meant to be mentorship, it's meant to be growth, and it's meant to make sure that that airman's performing at that next higher grade. - Excellent. So it sounds like setting their expectations is really important. - Very key. Exactly. Yes. If we set those expectations early, some of those highlights that we talked about at the beginning of this podcast could be eliminated, right? When we talk about some of the politics or even just transparency as a whole, if we set those expectations early enough, then everybody knows what we're talking about, right? They know what to expect. And the business seems so ambiguous or subjective to a member. - I agree. I think when people have clear expectations of what we want them to do and how to perform, it puts everybody on the same level, and then people really think about, "Hey, this is really fair and it's consistent, and I enjoy working here because I know what's expected of me." So what are the expectations for the NCO Corps then from a promotion

perspective? - Okay. So when we go into the NCO Corps, we really start talking about some of the technical capabilities, right? Airmen are developing, airmen are learning, so that airman tier is built to withstand some of that flexibility of the training. When we come to the NCO Corps, now we have a little bit higher expectation of what that technical expertise is going to be. So when we're promoting to staff sergeant, you have to have that five-skill level. So you've learned your skillset. You're growing into that skillset. You need to have 12 months time in grade and then four years of satisfactory service. Then also, now we talk about the importance of PME. The completion of ALS is required to move on to staff sergeant. And the fact that the reserves is a little bit different, we do open the gate a little bit in regards to what some of those courses are. So like an NCO prep course, in some cases, for individuals that may have been in longer or some NCO leadership school for the actual titles. And then when we talk about sister servicing, sometimes their schools will come into play to make sure that they've met the gate for the PME requirement. And then also the other piece is you have to have six months of retainability to become a staff sergeant. Then when we move to the next level, when we're transitioning to that real trade craft level, when we talk about a tech sergeant, now you have to have that seven-level skillset, right, for your primary AFSE. Then you're going to also need 24 months time in grade. You're going to need six years of satisfactory service and assigned in a primary incumbent position, right? So you can't be in an overage when we talk about union vacancies. Again, the other difference between Reg AF is the fact that you have to have a position, a primary position open for promotion where Reg AF it's testing all the way up to tech sergeant, and it doesn't matter what kind of position you're in. It's balanced across the system a lot different than the reserves where it's really balanced at the individual unit level. So that comes into play as well. And then again, you must have six months retainability. And when we talk about tech sergeant, all the way back to airman basic, all those promotions are within the grasp of the unit commander. The unit commander is taking recommendations from the supervisors and superintendents in some cases, and then making their decision to promote that airmen. That's where we talked about if there were some issues where the supervisor said let's hold, they would be taking that as a recommendation and making a decision based on the recommendation and any other documentation that might be in play. - So that's really good rundown. I really appreciate that. People can look to all this up in AFI? - Yes. Again, AFI 36-2502. The original publication date on that is December of 2014. However, there was updates back in 2019 that'll be in the front of that. And then specifically again, chapter eight really breaks down the reserves specifically. - How does the senior NCO promotions differ than our NCO and our airmen? - Right. So we talked about the growth of training for airman. We talked about the training tradecraft of our NCOs. When we talk about senior NCOs, now we're talking about leadership. So those expectations really start to change. So with those specifically going to a master sergeant, again, you have to have that skill level, a seven-level skill level, right? You also need to have 24 months time in grade, eight years of enlisted service, eight years of satisfactory service, and then again, sign to that primary position. But what we're looking at there... I apologize. I'm going to roll back for a second. There's also the PME requirement of having NCOA done.

Again, we highlight the education for leadership at this point, that's where that big transition starts to happen. And also what we're looking for. We're also asking for a reserve service commitment for our master sergeants. So now that we are entrusting into a leadership role, we want to make sure that that investment is held within the reserves for roughly two years, most cases. But with that recommendation, you're looking at, in some cases, some units will actually do a lot more development, specific development, and then be looking for those leadership traits. Again, even up to master sergeant, that's with inside the individual unit control. When we talk about senior master sergeant above, that's where things really start to change. That change requires actually wing commander approval for promotion to those two ranks. Senior master sergeant, you're looking for a seven or nine level. More often than not, we're looking towards that nine level, especially if we're talking about a significant leadership role within inside of a unit or elsewhere. Then in 24-months time in grade, we're looking at 11 years of satisfactory service, 10 years of at least enlisted service. And then we're also asking for that CCAF, right? We're asking for that degree that the Air Force has provided available to you or another accredited college degree. Again, we're showing some expanded capability where it's showing a commitment to the whole airmen concept, and then again, assigned to a primary position. Again, we're looking for senior NCOA at this time. So that time as a master sergeant, the expectation is that that senior NCOA is completed, whether it's through in person, in residence courses or through the virtual process now or distance learning through testing. And then again, we're looking at two years of retainability after this and that reserve service commitment. The other piece with a senior master sergeant here locally within the wing, what we do is we route E-triple S records review up to the group. We look at those career data briefs where we're validating that we've had some significant duties. We're seeing the kind of roles that we've taken on as an airmen NCO and a senior NCO to this point. The group superintendent, at that point, will actually do an interview just to see where you're at, ask you some questions, get some philosophies about your leadership capabilities and make some concurrences on the E-triple S before it goes to the wing. And then for leadership roles, if we're talking about a senior master sergeant that is going to be a superintendent, it's an interview panel. This interview panel consists of the command chief, the group superintendent or the group that you reside in. We use the other group superintendent as an uninterested party and the owning commander of that position. At that point, when we're vetting that out, we expect to have multiple candidates. So the actual documentation is cut down. We remove any information of where they're currently assigned, what the race is, what the religion is, what their gender or sex is, all of that's removed so it's a complete blind package. That package is then looked at, and then racked and stacked based on the credits of the record itself. The top three to five, depending on how many candidates, actually get selected, will then be put into the interview process for the commanders to make their selection with the recommendations of the rest of the board members. That cycle usually takes about a half-hour interview process, multiple questions. And we're looking into some of those answers. I'll get to that after I talk about the chief process. Chief process is very similar. Again, we're looking at the nine-level skillset, 24 months time in grade, 10 years minimum of enlisted

service. Again, we're looking for that CCAF or another accredited college degree, 14 years of satisfactory service, and then a course being assigned to a chief slot. And prior to assuming the grade, you have to meet the needs of the chief orientation course, the COC, prior to actually pending on. And then again, we're looking at that two years of retainability reserves service commitment. The difference here between senior and chief is that the command chief is the primary signatory for the recommendation prior to going to the wing commander for recommendation for promotion. So that's the bulk of it. And then opening it back up to you for questions, sir. - Sure. That's great. Thanks for laying that out. We kind of ran through that really fast. And all this is referenced, again, in the AFI, so people can go do that. I think maybe some of the concerns folks have are maybe a couple of things. What would you tell somebody that says enlisted promotions are political or it's a good old boy network, or the drinking buddies are the ones who get promoted? And maybe address in the context of how our promotion system has kind of changed, maybe just in your time. - Right. So those are valid concerns and valid statements. We've all been there, right? We've all sat there and saw someone else gets elected. We've seen someone else move forward where we may have not felt personally that that individual was ready or worthy of that promotion. And it's easy to assign some of that that statement to it from an emotional perspective what we've seen as far as changes because of those, right, is we couldn't unvalidated, we couldn't say that those things weren't true in some cases because there's always going to be a bad case is we're trying to have more transparency. I think that's one of the reasons why we're having this conversation. But Air Force wide is the mandating of these particular interview panels, the mandating of these recommendations. Because before, it was just a signature, right? All it took was an individual to say, "Yep, this guy's or this girl's good. Let's go ahead and make this happen." And boom, boom, boom, the hands are wiped, everything's solid, and there's nothing to validate that the process was fair. Now, when we go through these interview panels, we have multiple people on it. We have multiple recommendations and we have multiple signatures, all stating that yes, we reviewed these records, yes, that we took the time to interview this individual and then be able to produce a product and a justification up to AFRC when these selections are made saying that this was done, and this is why this particular member was hired. Additionally, for anybody that does apply for some of these jobs, we have to respond with why individuals were not selected as well. Which leads to a bigger piece of this, sir, is we already talked about it in the other tiers is those expectation management pieces, right? If we set that expectation early as leadership, this is what I'm looking for from my airmen, and this is what it takes to make it to the next level, explaining that on a regular basis. There should be minimal misunderstandings of what we're looking for so that when someone is selected, they can go, "Okay, I can see that in that individual. I can see that in that person." And then the secondary piece that we don't talk about too often is that feedback, right? So let's say that I was going up for a position to work for you here in the future and I wasn't selected. Obviously, I would want feedback, and that's where we would come in as leadership. So we now in those interview panels, we'll actually take the time to provide that feedback and say, "Hey, this is where you did well here. These are the things that really shined in your record. These are the things that

stood out as far as the interview. These are the things that we really liked about you, but here's the difference, right? This was a piece that we were missing. This is something we were looking for. You weren't able to really break that down." That comes to the intangible pieces that we talked about in these interviews. What are we looking for, right, an ability to summarize their career or an experience and as their selves to the interview panel. Understanding the concept of any questions, right? So we go into the intro. Here's who I am, here's what I know, this is I have done, then we ask specifically questions to understand a concept in leadership, a concept in a management and a concept of the Air Force in general. Are you able to take that question, break that question down, understand that concept and then apply it in a couple of ways? Apply it to your knowledge, apply it to your experience, apply it to actually in-person reference of this is what I've done to prove this is the way I manage relief. And this is how I would do it in the future, right? That way then interview panel understands that you know what we're talking about, you're able to break down what we're asking, and then also apply it in a way that we can recognize that you are knowledgeable in that skillset. And then the closeout piece of that is the ability to highlight any key points that you may have wanted to make or of the concepts that we're asked, as well as the ability to adjust or make corrections to your original answer, and ask questions of the interview panel. If you're engaged and know what the mission is, or you've taken the time to look up what that mission is and then ask specific questions about that position when it comes to the unit how does this work, what are some of these expectations, then it shows that you are engaged enough as well, that you want that position. But throughout, what we're looking for as well, each one of these questions is that military would be airwing the ability to relate to the questions to yourself, to the unit, outside organizations, how are you looking at this from the unit to the group, to the wing? So as a senior NCO, specifically when we're talking about seniors and chiefs, are individuals that are moving away from that tactical level thought process and up into the strategic and organizational levels, right? And then how are they able? Are they relatable? Are we able to talk? Are you able to articulate yourself and get your point across? It doesn't mean that we're not going to have stumbles. I mean, even on this podcast, right, I'm stumbling on myself on a regular basis. But it's kinda how do I maintain my composure, how do I recover, and then how am I able to relate that particular answer to the question? I think I've gone long winded and proven I shouldn't be hired. (Rick laughs) And then of course answering the questions directly and not dodging things. Did I answer your question, sir? - Yes. All great answers. You hit on a number of areas that I feel are really important. And since I joined the reserve in 2003, I've seen an enormous change for the positive in the way we kind of recruit, retain, and promote our enlisted Corps. - Right. Talent management is very key to us right now. When we look at how the service is growing, how we are even contracting at submission sets, we're constantly in leadership looking for those key leadership attributes and taking those and putting them in the right place. And that's where a lot of this stuff comes into play. We'll go outside of our normal sphere, more often than not now too, to find right attributes, the right attitudes and the right level of experience to make sure that we have good strong leaders. Especially in Cyber, we have great technicians, we got very smart airmen. We have airmen that are

highly technically capable, highly intelligent, which means it requires a certain level of leadership and management to understand that, as well as cultivate that kind of culture that we're looking for, not only from a military perspective, but from a cyber perspective. I think that in the civilian community, they actually look for some specific attributes when we were talking about these highly technical career fields. - Yeah, I agree. And I think sometimes it's hard for people to make that transition between, hey, I'm a technician every day, I'm really good at what I do. Now I've got this soft and squishy things that I need to do handle manage people, and it doesn't necessarily translate. Those same skill sets don't translate between the two. And so we have to grow that. - No. We do. And that's very specific in that grocer. I'm glad you brought that up, right, Because some of the concerns that we have are also based in the fact that sometimes, and this is where expectation management, good feedback and mentorship happen, people are just not ready. If you're not able to move from that technical expertise over into leadership realm and start to step away from the technical side, it doesn't mean completely this is you got inspired to do. You might not be selected, right? And that's where that feedback and the mentorship come into play explaining, hey, look, certain stuff, you're solid, man or you're really rocking it today, any day when it comes to the technical boat, you can't transition. I can get you off the console. I need you to be leading these programs. I need you to be driving these processes. Every time I hand you a process or a program, I find you back on the terminal and I get it. I love it. I miss it myself, but we have to make that transition, and that feedback loop is very key in that situation. - Well, I think even when we talk about with the officers a lot about, if you want to be a technician, that's fine, right? We're okay with that. But I think comes with the expectation of you're probably not going to have the same opportunity to somebody that wants to transition into more senior leadership position. And so we expect you to do certain things in order to make that transition. But it's okay if you don't want to. And I think our expectations have changed over time, at least I've seen them change. We expect way more now of our senior NCOs and our NCOs and even our airmen than we did in 2003 when I first joined the reserve. It's much different. - Being a kid of the '80s and serving in the '90s, right, it was a big, huge culture change over the years. I remember my first work center had like 25 individuals in it. And we had a huge table in there that we would congregate at. By the time I left that, we were down to five, right? We went to the massive drawdowns of the '90s, and now we are doing more with less. Those expectations are a lot higher. And yes, specifically when we get into those last two enlisted ranks, it's that leadership and management piece there. And that's the hard part is explaining how you may top out at E7 or E6 based on the technical. Not that it's a bad thing, but we have to set the right expectation of if you want to progress from these ranks up into the top 1, 2, 3%, you're going to have to transition. We don't have opportunities from a technical perspective to go there. It's just kind of the way it is. - Well, I really appreciate your time today. And we ran through this really fast. We understand that, this is just one way that you can consume some of this information. Again, it's in the AFI, and your supervisory chain should be able to help you through this. And certainly, this is not gonna be the last you'll hear about, this is just one piece of enlisted development, and we're doing a number of things here to address some of the concerns, the

feedback that we get. And this is just one way we decide to do that, so appreciate you time today, chief. - Definitely, sir. And of course, when it comes to specifics, by all means, anybody that's listening to this podcast, reach out to me, give me the specifics, ask the questions. I'm more than willing to walk you through where we may have gone, where those processes are, and then help with the mentorship to make sure that everybody's moving forward, right? I don't want any airmen to be left behind. And sometimes in the big units, we do find some holes. So by all means, reach out to me specifically, and I'll talk to you, kind of see what's going on and give you some mentorship where I can. - Thank you very much. And as we wrap it up, I think there's a couple of themes I want to kinda hit on here, and I think one is performance, right? The most important thing for everybody at every grade is to perform. - Yes, sir. - And as a supervisor, I think your number one task is to make sure everybody you supervise understand your expectations and that there's certainly a good feedback loop there between you to your subordinates and to supervisors, both ways. If you're not getting feedback, we highly suggest you demand the feedback, and you go to your supervisor and ask, and if it's not happening, continue to use the first sergeant, use the superintendent, use all your resources in the unit, use your commander and demand that feedback, we owe that to you. And that's the only way that you're going to know where you're at and how you're going to get better because we want everybody to be part of this experiment called American Experiment, and it's continuing to evolve. And of course in this wing too, we're trying to mature and become better. - I agree, performance is key, and setting those expectations and feedback are just as paramount. - Excellent. So we'll wrap up, and we'll talk to you next time. (Upbeat music)