



Protocol in the US Air Force

What it's like to work in a US Air Force Protocol Office



After nearly 20 years working in and around The United States Air Force protocol “world”, I am still filled with immense pride when I stand on the sidelines of an event my team and I have helped orchestrate. It may be to watch a military promotion, retirement or medal presentation to honor our an individual’s accomplishments; or it could be to remember our prisoners of war, those missing in action, or sadly, our fallen comrades. I have no idea how many ceremonies, events and conferences I’ve led, managed or advised on over the years; I suspect it is in the hundreds. All of these events hold great value and meaning.

US Air Force protocol offices across the globe manage a multitude of events: Ceremonies, Visits, Conferences, meetings, official meals and socials. This may be at a small base with 1 or 2 protocol officers or it could be at our larger commands with upwards of 10 members on a team. Protocol officers and teams can be military or civilian or a combination. Some may have years of experience or there may be a brand new Air Force member hired to take on the

task. You can imagine the challenges a young member of the Air Force would have handling delicate situations that arise in our line of work. I remember; I was that brand new officer years ago in a protocol shop of one! Mistakes were made, lessons learned and my path in this career began.

Overall, I think a protocol job in the US Air Force is very similar to working protocol on the “civilian side.” (“Civilian” is how we refer to everyone else who isn’t military!). Protocol officers across the globe work tasks such as invitations, seating, precedence, greetings and gifts. Yes US Air Force protocol is unique in regards to our traditions and how and *where* we celebrate major events, accomplishments and lives of our people who serve. We may be performing our duties in the United States, the Middle East or Europe. We may be working in/out of a tent or a beautiful conference center. I’ve even managed an evening social in the belly of a C-17 Globemaster aircraft. Now that one was a challenge!

And ceremonies...we are all about ceremonies! We hold a Change of Command when Commanders transition to/from their new position. This allows the people in the Command witness the transition from one leader to another; we hold promotion and retirement ceremonies, re-enlistment ceremonies, award and decoration ceremonies. Air Force protocol officers are in charge of writing the scripts, creating the sequence of events, designing the stage and set up, the programs, the invitations and R.s.v.p’s. and briefing the hosting Commanders on the plans of the event. We do this with very little money, usually on a short timeline, with limited manning, technology and a constantly changing environment. But we make it happen.

Another main function of a US Air Force protocol office is hosting guests visiting our bases. Our job is to support “VIPs” (we call them Distinguished Visitors or “DVs”). The majority of our visits are comprised of high level DVs (1 to 4 star generals), but can also include CEOs of large companies, foreign dignitaries and military officials, congressional or staff delegations and even our most senior government officials such as the Secretary of Defense and the President of the United States. We create and manage the itineraries, manage all the logistics, handle the accommodations, set up the meals and orchestrate and dictate where all of our



participants need to be. Some bases may receive only a few guests a year and other bases may receive many DVs a year (in a future article, I will discuss managing protocol at one of our busiest bases in the Air Force!). Certain bases will be busier with DVs depending on what missions exist (maybe aeromedical evacuation or fighter aircraft) or how many commands exist at a certain base (some have upwards of 40 different commands at one base).

One of my favorite duties in protocol is being on the flight line! Many of our DVs will fly in a military aircraft directly to the Air Force Base. There is a specific protocol that takes place on the flight line when the aircraft arrives. We line up our “on site” commanders in proper order of precedence to greet the aircraft. When the aircraft taxis up to our “red carpet” (literally painted on the flight line) our commanders salute the aircraft. The on-board DV returns the salute by moving his/her window up and down. I love that moment on the flight line as the aircraft taxis up: the visit preparation is done, the aircraft with the words “United States of America” pulls into place, our military commanders salute, DV vehicles are lined up ready to move everyone....and it’s time show our guests the best our base and people have to offer.



Let me also tell you about our challenges of funding and manning. The US Government has limitations and strict rules on what we can spend on refreshments or gifts and who can receive those items as we are stewards of the American tax payer dollars. And our manning challenge is due to funding *and* high turnover because of our active duty force move every 2 - 3 years. In an office filled with mostly military, a team will learn what to do, get off the ground, start doing great things....get settled and BAM, time to move to the next base. It’s tough, but it’s what we do. Thankfully we have more permanent civilians working in protocol today than when I begin this field. The civilian work force brings continuity to an office that needs it tremendously.

This is just a glimpse into our Air Force protocol world. Over the years, I have worked protocol jobs in the smallest of offices

(including tents) as well as the larger commands in a more corporate environment. I've worked these positions in the US, in Europe and the Middle East; with Special Agents, US Secret Service, local and foreign police departments, and state and local governments. Protocol at all of these locations is *different* with their culture and traditions, yet the *same* in that we are a hard working group of people who love the thrill of planning/execution and seek to bring people together. We protocol officers get a front row seat to some of our Air Force's most amazing moments: meeting/hosting senior leaders, witnessing historical events and helping to celebrate our people. It is an amazing career that happened to me by accident and I couldn't be happier to be a part of it all.