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# AFJAGS Podcast: Episode 11

## Career Path with Brigadier General Mark Maldonado – Part 2

**HOST:** MAJOR RICK HANRAHAN, USAF

**GUEST:** BRIGADIER GENERAL MARK MALDONADO, USAF

This is part 2, of a two-part interview, with Brigadier General Mark Maldonado, the current Commander for the District of Columbia Air National Guard. In this part, we discuss his perspective on mentorship, the Air Force, tips for selecting a career path, and thoughts on the JAG Corp at large.

**MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:**

Welcome to part two of our interview with Brigadier General Mark Maldonado, the Commander for the District of Columbia Air National Guard, where we discuss the topic of career path, along with some of his leadership lessons. If you didn't hear part one, please consider listening to the previous episode where we talk about his background as a pilot, personnelist, and JAG, including transition from active duty to the guard into the role of a federal prosecutor and then a commander. In this part, we discuss his perspective on mentorship, the Air Force, tips for selecting a career path, and thoughts on the JAG Corps at large. Here's a few clips from part two.

**GENERAL MARK MALDONADO::**

So you need to learn the units. You need to go in and go talk to the pilots and know how they operate. Go talk to the maintainers and know how they op. JAGs in particular, especially a really good JAG makes such an incredible difference in getting the mission done. I want to see JAGs being groomed for commander.

**ANNOUNCER:**

Welcome to the Air Force Judge Advocate General's Reporter Podcast, where we interview leaders, innovators, and influencers on the law, leadership, and best practices of the day, and now to your host from the Air Force Judge Advocate General's School.

**MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:**

And you mentioned mentorship, sir. This is something that's been brought up with other guests, through other episodes, which they emphasize the mentorship piece, and I couldn't agree with you more. I think it's extremely important, mentorship. And I would presume that you reached out to some of your mentors when you were making some of these bigger career decisions. Would that be a fair statement?

**GENERAL MARK MALDONADO:**

So, mentors, let's define that then, okay? Because I think mentors, your mentors are typically the ones that will impact the most, in my humble opinion, are your peers. And that's something that people forget. You know, a lot of times folks try and find mentors who are like three or four ranks above you. Those folks are important. Don't get me wrong. I mean, you want to get their perspective. But in the end, the people that have mattered the most and that'll push me forward the most and probably helped me the most are people who are my peers who just, you know who I could call up and say, "Hey, listen, I got this issue. What do you think?" Or there'll be the ones who call me and say, "Hey Mark, there's this job out here. We thought you'd be perfect for that. You should put in for that."

I've had those other types of mentors too. That you can talk to a little bit here and there. But I would say my life has been more 90 percent peers and maybe 10 percent other folks who I've talked to. So, the folks that are my mentors are my friends and some of them are a lot older than me, but they're friends that I go out and go to dinner with and spend time with and do activities with. I don't think I have a mentor that I could say someone that I don't really talk to regularly.

**MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:**

I think that's absolutely a fascinating insight with peer mentorship or lateral, we call sometimes lateral leadership in the leadership realm. How do you approach that? How do those conversations go or what are the discussions there?

**GENERAL MARK MALDONADO (3:00):**

I think those relationships are just built by being genuine and by really caring about the people that you're serving with and understanding that they're people and human beings and not, you know, sometimes I've seen it. I've seen so many times in my career, folks who openly discuss "Hey, I want to go get to meet this other person because they could help me get X, Y, Z." And they forget what's really in front of them and the people around you.

So, for instance my JAG class, I still keep in touch with I bet over half of those folks. And you know, they're just amazing human beings. And as we've gone up through our careers, we went from being just low-ranking folks although I went to JAG school, and I was a major, to these folks that are taking some really high-level jobs throughout the JAG Corps and doing amazing work. And so the first person that someone's going to call and talk to about, hey, is this person, the right person, for the job, is someone who knows you, right?

So, they're going to call your peers and that's how your reputation is formed too, right? So, you're going to end up having a great reputation or a bad reputation based on what your peers might think of you. And if they see you as a careerist or someone who's just looking out for yourself, they can smell that right off the bat, right? And so, I think my advice to folks is, you know, just enjoy the moment you're in. Do the best you can, right? And then get to know the people around you and then you can worry about those career steps later. But I just wouldn't get ahead of myself on that.

**MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:**

Great advice, sir. Great, great advice there. Thank you. So in January, 2010, you became the State Staff Judge Advocate for Joint Force Headquarters for the D.C. National Guard, which you held that position until April of 2017. Were there any new challenges associated with this job?

**GENERAL MARK MALDONADO (4:59):**

Yes because that job was the head JAG job. Typically, for an Air National Guard unit, that's the head, the tip of the spear JAG position. And so in that position, you're dealing with not only understanding what the local units are looking to do for disciplinary issues, where there's a lot of counselings or wills and those type of base level help. What you're doing also on the Joint Force Headquarters side, is you're looking at overall policy and you're looking at how do we interact outside of the wing structure to high-level headquarters, either Air Force or National Guard Bureau or even a local community.

So, it gives you a bigger perspective on the impact of what the mission does to the outside community and the people that you're serving. So, that job was, I really loved that job. It just had such a myriad level of different issues that came up from court cases that were being handled, and how do we settle those and how do we handle those cases, to community requests for information, employer requirements. You know, those kinds of issues. And so, it also dealt with, as command, how do we structure policies that affect the entire National Guard, Army and Air, so that we can work together as one team. So, very interesting work. I really loved it.

**MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:**

Do you think it kind of gives you maybe more or less a quote unquote *competitive advantage* to have been a pilot and a personnelist in your capacity as a Judge Advocate?

**GENERAL MARK MALDONADO (6:33):**

I think so, but I will tell you that had I not had those experiences I think someone could still be very successful at it. I think the thing to learn is not; it's not that I learned how to pull it back and then the houses get smaller and push it forward and houses get bigger type of thing. Those *technical aspects* of that, of doing our job. It's not really where we're getting the perspective I think. I think it was just understanding the operational side and how the mission's done on that end, right? The

maintenance side and the pilots and to be able to talk to those folks in a way that had credibility.

But here's how you do it without having those experiences. The first thing that I always tell folks if you want to be successful is know and do your job, right? And that's something I heard from when I was a lieutenant. And the way to do that is know that your job is to give counsel to commanders and others to help them make decisions. And so, you need to learn the units. You need to go in and go talk to the pilots and know how they operate. Go talk to the maintainers and know how they operate. You got to really get to a point of understanding what matters to them. What the mission set is and how they do their job. Go to events where they are there. Understand them from that standpoint. And that's how you build that credibility of legitimacy that they're looking for in order for when they look at you and tell you a problem, they'll know that you understand what they're talking about. And so you have to get out of your office.

And I would say that you could build so you can have the same experience I've had. You can get the same level I got to by doing those things. You don't have to have had those actual experiences. So, they helped me a great deal, absolutely, because my scope and the breadth of experience that I was able to gain has given me the unique gift of understanding the ripple effects in a wide array, prism of understanding, that if I make this decision, this is the legal issues that we're going to be dealing with. Here's the personnel type issues we're going to be dealing with. And then because of those jobs, I was able to gain a lot of information about finance. I was able to get a lot of information about the maintenance side of the house, logistics, how it affects readiness, communications. And so we just learned kind of the whole scope of things.

And that doesn't make me perfect, right? I mean I still make mistakes and you have to keep learning. But I think for anybody out there who's starting off in the JAG Corps, I would just say know and do your job. Get to know the

clients. Get to know who they are, not just when they come into your office and chit chat with them. Actually go out there and understand how they [inaudible].

**MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:**

So in other words, take a genuine interest, right? In knowing the mission, knowing your client. And if you do those things, even if you don't necessarily have the same background as you, sir, or many other people that have prior AFSCs that have moved into the legal career field, you can still be very successful.

**GENERAL MARK MALDONADO:**

That's right. That's exactly right.

**MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:**

So, sir, today, you know, you're sitting as the Commander of the D.C. Air National Guard. How have your three career fields shaped your view of the Air Force, its mission and its people?

**GENERAL MARK MALDONADO (9:49):**

I've learned that the Air Force is more than just airplanes, that the Air Force is about people with a lot of varied skills that come together to make the mission happen and that they're all integral to make it happen.

So, you know, when I was a pilot in the beginning, you just think pilots are the reason why we're here. And here, you know, that's the real mission. And then once you leave that, you realize, no, that's not true at all. That everybody comes together to make it all happen. And I can tell you JAGs in particular, especially a really good JAG, makes such an incredible difference in getting the mission done. I have my own set of lawyers here in this position and I rely on them so much, even though I'm a JAG now and even though I've done the jobs that they've had, you can't really, you know, today's world with which as much as regulations is out there and then the different impacts that each of the decisions can have the ripple effect and make, you really need to have your JAG with you and someone you trust to make good decisions because it's almost impossible to do it

without that input. It's almost impossible not to take into account the viewpoint that a JAG has on the different disciplinary matters and how that affects the morale, the folks and what actual actions you should take in a certain set of circumstances, because the circumstances change all the time. Someone who understands the different regulations and how to interpret them. Someone who knows case law and then can give you perspective on what you're trying to achieve. Those folks are invaluable to make good decisions as leaders. And so, I would say that's perspective that I've gotten from all the different jobs is that they all matter.

**MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:**

And kind of that goes back to that reiterative process that you mentioned about taking ownership right in your job, learning it and also understand your client and its mission.

**GENERAL MARK MALDONADO (11:53):**

Yes, that's key. You really have to. You have to know and do your job. So, I would say when you first become a JAG, you need to know all the regulations code. You need to know all the different rules that govern being a JAG, all the things that you learned in JAG school. You need to really put the time in and know that as well as possible because once you become a technical expert in your job and that builds legitimacy by which folks come to you and trust you and what you say, right? Because we're not, you know, you're not there to give just your opinion on something. You're there to give. Here's the wide array of information, and here's the decisions that you can make in order to fit what the requirements are out there what the rules, regulations say. And then on top of that, then you need to go out and get to know your client to such a level that you can talk to them in a way that makes sense to them and that they can look at you and know that you understand who they are.

**MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:**

Yes sir. Great stuff there, sir. If you could go back in time to your quote unquote *formative* college years, what would

you tell yourself about selecting your career and what would you say to our young Airmen today on that topic?

**GENERAL MARK MALDONADO (12:56):**

I'm going to give you something that I'm sure folks have heard many times. Just follow your passion. You know, I've always wanted to be a lawyer, and I did it. And so, I would just follow your passion and then do it to the best of your ability. And the interesting thing about that is if you do that, all the opportunities will open themselves to you that you had no idea existed and that you could not have foreseen. And so as long as you're doing the best you can in everything you do, opportunities would just present themselves to you because folks will seek you out in order to give you those opportunities. Because everybody wants someone who's competent, who's passionate and who's dedicated to the mission. And so that's what I would say. But I, looking back, I would just pursue something that you're passionate about and become the best at it.

**MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:**

And would you say that because people typically tend to do better at a job that they like and enjoy and that maybe they're good at?

**GENERAL MARK MALDONADO (14:02):**

Yeah, right. And I think to know and do your job, part of that comes from that selection process of what you're choosing your job to be, if you can right? And sometimes you're not going to. Sometimes knowing and doing your job also means you do something, and someone tells you that you're going to pick up garbage today where you become the best at that. And by doing that, that will create more opportunities for you. Right, what you just said is right.

**MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:**

And as a current leader, how do you take that principle and apply it to your Airmen? In other words, do you try to connect what Airmen are passionate about and are good at with what they can do in their current job?

**GENERAL MARK MALDONADO (14:36):**

And that's part of the mentorship piece. And I think we talked earlier about mentors, but I think the responsibility for us as we get higher in rank, is that we become active mentors. We don't wait for folks to show up and ask us questions. We actually take care of them. So, for instance, right now we just finished writing a Force Development Policy. We've not had that policy before, as such. There was no such policy in existence. But the policy then is that because we've taken a look at our folks and how do we develop them. How do we give them the tools they need to become the best in their jobs so they can know and do their jobs the best way possible? How do we help them along that path? And so we're doing things like I'm sitting down with folks when they get their ACAs and showing them the list of schools and PME and job opportunities that are in front of them, so we can sit down and actually give them a sense of here's the scope of what's out there. So, as you go on each step of your career, as you progress up in ranks, you're able to sit down and kind of look, hey, I may want to do this. And then that also forces the supervisors to have those discussions with that person where there's, you know, we look at everybody from the tech sergeant all the way to the officer ranks and look at the different possibilities that they have in front of them. So, that way we can mentor them that way and help them to know and do their job.

**MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:**

And in relation to that mentorship, many often view career paths in almost a formulaic manner *i.e.*, they may say, I have to get this job and then this job in order to set myself up for quote unquote *success* in order that they can promote. And while there may be some truth to this mentality, I think there may also be some mental roadblocks associated with it. How would you reply to this?

**GENERAL MARK MALDONADO (16:28):**

So, the perfect example, how that didn't happen here. I did not follow any formula. Essentially all I did was

learn my job the best way possible. Become a technical expert at every step of the way. And then any leadership opportunity that came up, I took it. So, I think the reason why I got the job that I have now is partly because I understand the legal side so well, the personnel side and operational side, but also because even as a JAG, whenever those decisions to be made in the room folks always turned to me for my judgment. And they trusted me because of all those other experiences that I had with them, where I got to know them. I got to help out different squadrons for whatever issue that they needed without them even asking for it.

And so, I think the best thing, the best advice I can give folks is do the best job you can of what you're doing now. If you start looking too far ahead, it's almost impossible to predict. And most people, you know if you look at your life just in general, five years ago you couldn't have planned to be where you are right now. And if you think you can plan five years from now where you're going to be, that's almost impossible because the factors that you can't control are the different people that are going to be in your lives, the folks that are around you and how they see you. And you could control that. But the point of that is those folks also have a huge effect on you and then, you know, just where you might be in different fields as you go along and different jobs and different opportunities and those things sometimes don't come. You know, the timing of that sometimes just doesn't always work out.

But I would say if you do the best you can now and you build yourself into the kind of person that folks know. Do your job, carry yourself with integrity. You embrace failure. And by that I mean, I've learned. I've learned more from failure than I've learned from any success I've had. You know, the biggest thing you can do for yourself is to build your skillset. And so you need to build yourself to be the best leader you can. And I think by that you have to be able to communicate effectively. So, if you're the kind of person that has trouble speaking in crowds, then you've got to put yourself out there and embrace that fear and put yourself in as many speaking

engagements as possible. If you're someone who has a tough time writing, well-then you need to write as often as you can. Don't hide from it. Like most people when they feel they're not good at something, they go, wow, I'm going to steer away from it. I did the opposite. You just got to go towards it and make that your strength. And so that's advice I would give folks.

**MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:**

Great stuff, sir. Thank you. Any resources, whether a book, a movie, video, podcast or just kind of activities that you would recommend for any of our listeners about career path and or leadership, for our listeners?

**GENERAL MARK MALDONADO (19:25):**

All right, so I'm going to give you a book that I'm sure your listeners are probably going to be, "I don't know about this one," but I'm a big fan of metrics. I'm a big fan of being able to gauge how we're doing and metrics can be misleading, right? Depending on how you use them. But I always like to take a look at our organization just to see what's the trend here? How are we progressing? Are we achieving goals? And I like to set goals that are achievable and that you can measure as well.

So, a book that I thought was really interesting that went into that a lot and I think was really helpful was a book called *American Icon*. It's a book about **Alan Mulally and Ford**, the Ford Motor Company. And I would focus specifically on some of the metrics and the way those were implemented in that company in order to help turn it around. So, I liked that book. I liked it a lot and you could just get it as an audiobook too. And it's an easy listen but it gave some great tips on how you can utilize metrics in a positive way to lead an organization.

And then there are the other books that I read, and I like a lot are just biographies. Like Colin Powell's biography; I liked a lot too. And I just think it's always interesting just to see how other people live their lives and the different decisions that they make and the choices they make. But what you learn from those things is that there is no life that's the same as anybody else's, right? But ultimately

you guide yourself by certain principles of living life and everybody gives you advice all the time about what to do. But these folks, I don't think any of them had careers that really mirrored what you can put down on paper as a perfect career. I think they all just did their best, and other people recognized it and then put them in positions of greater influence because of it.

**MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:**

Yes sir. And we'll make sure to put that book in the show notes. And with that, sir, any last or any final tips or parting words on the topic of career path and leadership that you would like to impart to our listeners?

**GENERAL MARK MALDONADO (21:32):**

I think JAGs have one of the biggest impacts of any profession out there. I think all of them matter, obviously, like I said earlier. But I don't know if the JAG Corps fully embraces or understands the impact that the JAGs have in terms of being leaders, right? So, when I went to JAG School, a lot of it was, hey, you're here to consult. You're not here to make decisions from behalf of commanders, but I want to see JAGs being groomed for command.

When you take a look at that career field, I can't see another career field that touches every single aspect of every piece of the mission that is done in every base. And JAGs know if you know and do your job, like I said earlier, you're going to know every aspect of it. You build great judgment because you've been around commanders who you see them make decisions, how they make the decisions, why they made those decisions. And I like to see the JAG Corps be like other services that you see more JAGs taking command. And so that's my last piece on that.

**MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:**

Well, sir, thank you so much. I think you've had a lot of great insights here, especially this last comment about JAGs being groomed for command. That will definitely give our listeners plenty to think about and reflect upon. So, sir, thank you so much for your time today. It's been

an honor and a privilege and that'll be it for today's episode, sir.

**GENERAL MARK MALDONADO:**

Oh, thank you so much. You're doing great, thank you.

**TAKEAWAYS (23:03)**

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**MAJ RICK HANRAHAN:**

My five key takeaways from the interview with Brigadier General Maldonado include, **one, there's no perfect career path**. Brigadier General Maldonado recommends to follow your passion, and doors will open to you. As he admits, this advice is nothing new, but it holds true. You can obviously find a lot of advice on career paths out there. Many believe you should strive for a job that will set yourself up for the greatest success regardless of whether you necessarily like the job. These folks place emphasis on opportunity rather than passion and state that you'll come to enjoy what you become good at. I think there's truth to this as well. With that, it's safe to say that both perspectives on passion and opportunity are correct and required for any long-term success. So, seek out a career or job whenever feasible where the cross-hairs of passion and opportunity meet. There, at that convergence, you're likely to find the most success and satisfaction in your career.

**Number two, you can leverage your military and civilian experiences in either career.**

Brigadier General Maldonado states his military experiences prepared him on so many levels, including how to handle stress, manage people and value a sense of mission. He mentions how the Department of Justice, where he was selected as a federal litigator out of a very competitive field, valued his sense of mission, varied experiences and above all, a belief or trust that he would make sound judgements based on his military experiences. These experiences shaped his development and character, poise, and leadership that the interviewers clearly recognized. He then capitalized on his civilian litigation experiences to make him a better JAG and officer.

**Number three, become an active mentor.** If you find yourself in a leader mentorship role, take ownership in your folks. Ask questions like, how can I help them along their path or can I assist in finding them more opportunities to grow and develop? In other words, as Brigadier General Maldonado states, don't wait for folks to show up and ask questions. Rather seek out opportunities for them, and you'll often be amazed at what they can do.

**Number four, value peer mentorship.** Don't forget the valuable role that peer mentorship plays. We often focus on vertical mentorship *i.e.*, from a senior leader to a junior mentee. However, Brigadier General Maldonado states that the vast majority of his mentorship involved his peers. He mentions how it is your peers who will likely be with you through the majority of your career; while senior mentors will eventually retire. It is your peers that often know you the best and truly play an integral part in your development.

**Last and number five, get out of your office to better learn the mission, build relationships and trust.** You've likely heard this point before, but there's a reason for it. JAGs and paralegals may often get caught up in their office life and fail to develop relationships outside of it. The legal career field is a busy one, no doubt, but efforts should be made to get out of the office, meet the commanders and others, learn from them and develop lasting relationships. E-mails and phone calls are a handy means of communication, but they're not the only way. What is easier is not always the best. There's still no substitute and face to face interaction where trust can be built on a higher level. With that, thank you for listening to another episode from the Air Force Judge Advocate General's School. We'll see you on the next episode.

**ANNOUNCER:**

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