

**Frequent Flyer Miles
& Other Travel-Related Benefits --
To Whom Do They Belong?**

by

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I. Introduction

The Army Standards of Conduct Office has received many questions concerning the use of frequent flyer miles and related benefits received while on official Government temporary duty (TDY) orders. This is good, because the rules are not easy to understand; they are complicated (some would say Byzantine), and they are not always intuitive or logical. As a result, we encourage you to contact your Ethics Counselor to help resolve these issues. The purpose of the following article is to give you a basic understanding as to how to deal with these matters.

The travel industry is constantly coming up with innovative ideas to induce your business and create brand loyalty. For example, airlines give “mileage” that their customers can accumulate and use for free upgrades and tickets in the future. When you are “bumped” by an airline, you might receive a free overnight in a local hotel, meals and a coupon good for a free round-trip ticket; this “bump” might be voluntary or involuntary. When you pay your TDY expenses using your personal credit card, you might receive a rebate for each dollar charged, or you might be given a frequent flyer mile for each dollar charged.

However, by law and regulation, we must always have the best interests of the United States, our Service and the taxpayer in mind when conducting Government business; not how we can best benefit personally.

II. Frequent Flyer Miles

The mileage points received from an airline for traveling TDY on its aircraft belong to the U.S. Government. There are no exceptions. Even if the Government cannot use them (for example, you retire from Government service), you may not use them for your personal travel. You may not even donate them to a charity.

These mileage points can be used only in connection with official travel (*e.g.* TDY or official permanent change of station (PCS) travel). You may also use these mileage points if, after retirement, you are issued invitational travel orders for official travel. They may not be used for travel on permissive TDY or while on leave.

Department of Defense policy is to use mileage points to reduce the cost of future official TDY travel. However, you may also use them to upgrade your seat while on official TDY travel, but **not** to First Class. You may upgrade only to something less than First Class. If there are only two classes on the flight, the higher class is considered First Class, no matter what it might be called, and you may not upgrade. If you use official TDY travel points to upgrade to business class for an overseas flight, but the first portion of your travel in the United States (*e.g.* from your origination point to the port of embarkation) has only two classes, you may not ride in the higher (first) class section during that portion of the trip.

It is not required, but recommended, that you maintain separate accounts for your personal travel benefits and those benefits earned while on official TDY travel. However, if you keep your personal and official miles in the same airline account, you must keep track of those that belong to you and the Government because the presumption is that all of the mileage belongs to the Government.

III. Upgrades to First Class Air

The rule set out in the Joint Travel Regulation (JTR) and Joint Federal Travel Regulation (JFTR) prohibits First Class air travel except in three narrowly construed situations. Secretary of the Army approval is required if any one of these exceptions is used. However, this does not mean that you may never upgrade yourself to fly First Class while on official Army travel. You may upgrade and fly First Class in the following situations:

- a. You may use your own Frequent Flyer benefits, earned while on **personal** travel, to upgrade to First Class.
- b. You may use your own funds to purchase an upgrade to First Class.
- c. You may accept an on-the-spot upgrade that is **not** being offered because of your grade or position, but to anyone under the circumstances (for example, you arrive late and the aircraft is full except for a First Class seat which you are offered).
- d. You may use a coupon that you received because you are a member of an airline “club” by virtue of the number of miles that you have flown with the airline, even if some or all were flown on TDY. However, this must be a “no cost” upgrade,

meaning that you did not “cash in” official mileage points to gain membership to the club, or exchange official points for the coupon.

If traveling in first class in one of the above situations, to avoid inappropriate appearances, military personnel should not travel in uniform.

IV. Gifts Received When “Bumped”

If you are “bumped” from a flight, or there is some other delay, the airline might provide you with a room for the night, your meals, and a coupon for a round-trip ticket anyplace in the United States. All such benefits belong to the Government. Your TDY claim should reflect no cost for the hotel room and your *per diem* should be reduced accordingly for the meals provided. The coupon for a round-trip ticket can only be used for future Government travel. Similarly, if your flight is delayed for five hours and the airline gives each of the inconvenienced passengers a coupon for a free flight, that coupon also belongs to the Government.

However, if you **volunteered** to be “bumped” and received these benefits, they belong to **you**. Your delay, however, must not interfere with your mission, nor should the Government incur any additional costs because of your delay. You are considered to be on your own time, and your travel claim must reflect this personal time.

V. Credit Cards

Numerous credit card plans offer cash rebates, discounts on future purchases, and even airline mileage points, all calculated by how much you charge. If you use your personal credit card while on TDY to charge your meals, hotel rooms, and even travel

tickets, the benefits extended to you by your credit card company belong to you. For example, if you have a VISA card that is affiliated with United Airlines, and if you buy a \$500 ticket for a TDY flight on United Airlines, you receive 500 miles from VISA credited to your United Airlines account. Those 500 miles belong to you. However, the 2,000 miles that are credited to your account for the 2,000 miles that you fly on that ticket belong to the Government.

VI. Conclusion.

Some of the rules concerning the use of frequent traveller benefits are easy to understand, *e.g.*, frequent flyer miles earned while on TDY belong to the Government. However, there are many permutations in this area, especially with so many different marketing schemes constantly being developed by the travel industry. Accordingly, you are encouraged to seek the advice of your Ethics Counselor.