



The Forge: Lives in Leadership Podcast - Australian Defence College

SHOW NOTES

Episode Summary, Highlights and Full Transcript

SEASON 01: EPISODE 03

Guest: AVM Steve 'Zed' Robertson

Host: Dr Lucas Marie



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<https://theforge.defence.gov.au/lives-leadership/season-1-episode-03-avm-steve-zed-roberton>

Lives in Leadership explores leadership in demanding environments, featuring insights from experienced practitioners drawn across Defence, government, industry, and academia. Through sharing compelling stories and perspectives, the podcast explores military leadership, ethics, culture, and service in the Profession of Arms. The podcast focuses on insights in joint and integrated appointments at the operational and strategic level. It complements existing single-service professional military development platforms.



S01E03 – AVM Steve ‘Zed’ Robertson – Episode Summary

Duration: 32 minutes

Key Themes: Military leadership, multinational operations, ethics, mental health, technology in warfare

Overview: In this episode of Lives in Leadership, Dr. Lucas Marie sits down with Air Vice Marshal Steve "Zed" Robertson to explore military leadership, ethics, and the complexities of commanding multinational operations.

Key Discussion Points

Key Leadership Qualities: Zed identifies four essential leadership qualities honed through military service:

- **Respect** - Cannot be faked, especially under combat stress
- **Integrity** - Revealed when leaders face pressure
- **Teamwork** - Essential even in single-seat fighter operations
- **Excellence** - Continuous pursuit of being the best, never settling

Military to Civilian Transition

After leaving the Air Force, Zed joined McKinsey & Company, initially experiencing severe imposter syndrome in corporate boardrooms. However, he discovered that fundamental leadership principles—framing problems, analysing situations, and pulling the best from teams—translate across military and commercial contexts. The key difference: the military's unique legal authority to take lives and the profound responsibility that comes with command.



Operation Okra: Leading Australia's Largest Air Deployment Since Vietnam

Zed commanded Air Task Group 630 during Operation Okra, deploying 400 RAAF personnel and multiple aircraft types (F/A-18s, E-7 Wedge Tails, KC-30 tankers) to Iraq in just 19 days—Australia's first self-deployed air task group since Vietnam. The operation supported Iraqi and Kurdish forces against ISIS, including the rescue of the Yazidi people trapped in the Sinjar Mountains, earning Zed the Distinguished Service Cross.

Managing Multinational Complexity

Beyond commanding Australian forces, Zed served as the inaugural coordinator for international air task group leaders from 13+ nations. His approach:

- **Build relationships quickly** through transparency and candour
- **Listen without judgment** to understand each nation's objectives and red lines
- **Find common ground** rather than focusing on disagreements
- **Never take it personally** when cultural or political tensions arise
- **Respect differences** in rules of engagement and operational approaches

His success came from being inside the Five Eyes alliance without colonial baggage, making Australia a trusted intermediary between Western and Middle Eastern partners.

Mental Health and Leadership Responsibility

Reflecting on the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide, Zed emphasises that leaders don't get to decide what triggers trauma in their people. He's witnessed maintainers carry guilt over accidents they had no role in, and operations centre personnel affected by watching death on screens. The lesson: different people react differently and unpredictably—leaders must respect this and create supportive environments.



The Future: AI, Technology, and Ethics

On emerging warfare technology, Zed argues that while tools change (from catapults to AI), the nature of war remains fundamentally human. The increasing depersonalisation of warfare through technology makes ethics and leadership more critical than ever. Taking a life is "as human as it gets," and the impacts are long-lasting—no matter how advanced the technology becomes.

Memorable Quotes

On leadership under pressure: *"When you are under a lot of pressure, leaders show who they really are, and that's one of the great privileges of leadership. When people fear for their lives, or more importantly, when you fear for the lives of those into your care, you can really see what makes people tick."*

On building multinational trust: *"Trust is built up through transparency. So, I would open and say, look, this is what is really important to Australia. This is why we are here. This is probably our red lines. This is where we differ about how can we help for you to exceed or succeed, and how can we make sure that your government will look favourably on your actions over here."*

On technology and the human element of warfare: *"I think the role of ethics and leadership in the modern military is far more important than it ever was, simply because the rate of change and the technology can even more easily make things depersonalised. And I would argue that there is no greater consequence or that you never get more human than when you're looking at taking someone else's life. And that's about as human as it gets, and the impacts can be very long lasting."*



About the Guest

Air Vice Marshal Steve "Zed" Robertson joined the Royal Australian Air Force in 1989 and has distinguished himself as a leader at all levels of military command. A fighter pilot by training, he led squadrons and wings before commanding the inaugural Air Task Group 630 during Operation Okra—Australia's largest air deployment since the Vietnam War—for which he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. His leadership extended beyond air combat capability to senior strategic roles, including as Air Commander Australia and Head, Force Design, within the Vice Chief of Defence Force Group. After transitioning from military service, Zed joined McKinsey & Company as a global consultant, working with CEOs and multinational corporations across London and Canada. Throughout his career, whether coordinating multinational coalition forces in the Middle East or navigating complex corporate boardrooms, Zed has demonstrated that the fundamental principles of leadership—respect, integrity, teamwork, and the relentless pursuit of excellence—transcend contexts and cultures. His unique perspective bridges operational combat experience, strategic defence planning, and commercial leadership, making him an invaluable voice on the evolving challenges facing military leaders in an era of rapid technological change.

Resources & References

Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide - Final report with 122 recommendations released approximately one year prior to this recording. The report includes recommendations on leadership and cultural change, operational support, and systemic reform to ADF culture.

<https://defenceveteransuicide.royalcommission.gov.au>

Operation Okra - Australia's counter-ISIS air campaign in Iraq and the Levant (2014), involving Air Task Group 630 with approximately 400 RAAF personnel deploying F/A-18 Super Hornets, E-7 Wedge Tail aircraft, and KC-30 tankers.

<https://www.defence.gov.au/defence-activities/operations/global-operations/okra>



S01E03 – AVM Steve ‘Zed’ Robertson – Time Stamped Highlights

1:27 - Core Leadership Qualities: AVM Robertson identifies four essential leadership qualities: respect, integrity, teamwork, and excellence - traits that transcend all military branches.

3:25 - Military to Industry Transition: Discussion of transitioning from military to McKinsey & Company, experiencing imposter syndrome, and discovering that fundamental leadership principles apply across sectors.

5:21 - Command Authority & Lethal Force: The unique aspects of military command - the legal authority to take lives and the profound responsibility that comes with leading people in combat.

10:56 - Operation Okra Deployment: Details of Australia's first self-deployed air task group since Vietnam - 400 personnel, multiple aircraft types, deployed 12,000km in just 19 days' notice.

16:29 - Building Multinational Coalitions: How to build trust and navigate cultural differences when coordinating 13+ nations with different objectives, backgrounds, and rules of engagement.

21:23 - Influence & Authenticity: Navigating the complex space of influence in multinational operations - being transparent about red lines while respecting different national objectives.

26:39 - Defence Mental Health & Royal Commission Response to the Royal Commission on Veteran Suicide: the importance of recognising that different people react differently to trauma, including non-combat personnel.

29:38 - AI, Technology & Future Warfare: The depersonalisation of warfare through technology and why ethics and leadership are more important than ever in the age of AI and autonomous systems.



S01E03 – AVM Steve 'Zed' Robertson – Full Transcript

[00:00:00] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Welcome to Lives in Leadership. This podcast is dedicated to promoting thoughtful and strategic conversations about military leadership, ethics, culture, and service in the profession of arms within the Australian Defence Force. My name is Dr Lucas Marie, and in today's episode, I'm joined by Air Vice Marshal Steven Robertson, also known as 'Zed'.

Zed joined the Royal Australian Air Force back in 1989 and throughout his service has been a leader at almost every level, from leading fighter squadrons and wings to commanding the inaugural Air Task Group 630 on Operation Okra, for which he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

However, his leadership is not only shaped through air combat capability, but he has also held senior appointments both in Defence and in the private sector, including serving as Air Commander Australia and Head Force Design within the Vice Chief of Defence Force Group. Zed, welcome to the podcast.

[00:01:08] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Robertson:** Thank you so much.

[00:01:09] **Dr Lucas Marie:** I guess my first question is just an open reflection one reflecting on your years within the Royal Australian Air Force, as a fighter pilot and then a commander participating in international missions, what core qualities do you believe are most important for successful leaders within the military, based on your experience?

[00:01:27] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Robertson:** um, wow, right out of the gate. Yeah. I look, I think certainly having been in industry now for a few years, you come to reflect just how privileged the women and men of the Defence Force are at getting exposed to leadership scenarios very early on in their career. I think that hones some of the key qualities that you really need to be a successful leader.

And you know, to summarise the four that I think really stand out is people that show and demonstrate and encourage respect. There is no way of hiding that, especially in combat situations or in high stress. You are or you aren't. You can't fake it.



The second one, very similarly, is just integrity. When you are under a lot of pressure, leaders show who they really are, and that's one of the great privileges of leadership. When people fear for their lives, or more importantly, when you fear for the lives of those in your care, you can really see what makes people tick.

Teamwork is absolutely essential, and probably more so ironically in single-seat fighter operations because you're in your own aeroplane, but you rely on an entire team to bring that together.

And then the last one, I think, has been the cornerstone certainly of the fighter community is the excellence, like that just continual pursuit of being the very best; that you can be and never being satisfied.

So, you know, they're four, qualities that I think transcend all branches of the services and, uh, and, and key leadership traits of every successful leader I've ever met.

[00:03:09] **Dr Lucas Marie:** And it seems like you've had to lead people within very complex, you know, operational environments. I'm sure the, even within industry, there's some complex environments in that case. Um, what have you learned about leading people within those complex environments?

[00:03:25] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Robertson:** When I first left the military, I decided to go into an industry looking at different options, but I wanted to go into an area that was going to really push me, to put me most outside of my comfort zone. And I did remark to my wife in the first six months I might have overdone it a couple of times. I felt so far out of my comfort zone. Uh, I joined a global consulting outfit - McKinsey and Company - an outstanding outfit. Spent a lot of time in London and Canada. But all of that to say I'd find myself in boardrooms with CEOs of mining companies or multinationals.

And on Monday I would walk in with that imposter syndrome that so many of us feel. Um, not really sure of the financials or the commerciality or really what the drivers were, but by Tuesday evening Wednesday, I felt more confident that the fundamental principles of leadership and of what is important of being able to frame and then analyse a problem are the same in the military as they are commercially.



Um, and so you get a bit more confidence. I say that because quite often, by Friday I'd be back to, no, no, I feel completely out of my depth again. But, uh, yeah, I think the ability of leaders to pull the best out of a team, you know, that is, that is sort of the core principle.

[00:04:45] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Zed, That's really fascinating. I think what's interesting is that discussion about that transition from military leadership to say private sector leadership, and it's really interesting to hear that you found it quite similar in the fact of leading certain teams. Are there anything, is there anything that you think is distinctly different? Like what, what kinds of, um. I kind of, what's a kind of aspects or things that you think are really important that only are kind of important within the military in terms of leadership?

[00:05:21] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Roberton:** I think the military aspect of command and that, that legal authority that comes in the military and of course the trauma and the responsibility when you're dealing with taking lives and that legal authority from government to be able to , in fact, to be tasked to go and, execute sort of lethal authority. That is something that you probably think a little bit about as a junior officer, but when you're actually you know, in command of those folks that are doing it, and more importantly that you, you see the aftermath and the impact that that can have on the people that you are leading. It really hits home. So that's one clear difference there.

There's more generic differences. The military, we tend to have just an endless supply of very talented young women and men coming through the system that can do, uh, that will always step up to the plate. I don't think there's ever been a generation that hasn't underestimated the capacity of the next generation just to deal with the problems that we've had. I, I have enormous faith and optimism, um, in, uh, in the folks that are coming through. Um, but, but there are some differences too, and I think two of them would be. You know, if you've relate it to the commercial area anyway, there's, um, there's no training or real requirement most of the time for military leaders to understand the difference between, you know, price, cost, and value you know, in a, in both a commercial sense and how things work. Um, and I think we can be, uh, subject within the military or defence organisation of not valuing time and people's time to the extent that is required in, uh, in the commercial settings, but you know, they're on the edges. Leadership is leadership.



[00:07:14] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Yeah. Yeah, definitely. I worked for a little bit in emergency services in which, um, you know, it's, it takes a, a certain type of leader there to deal with the sorts of, um, kind of life and death situations that, not at all like the military, but it's a different context and a different sort of, you know, leader thrives in that environment to say in industry. And I think what's interesting is to think about those differences and similarities across. You know, we, even within the military, there's different sorts of leaders, right? Um, operational leaders compared to say

[00:07:42] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Robertson:** Yeah. And very different cultures

[00:07:43] **Dr Lucas Marie:** within

[00:07:44] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Robertson:** trainings, you know, the,

[00:07:44] **Dr Lucas Marie:** yeah.

[00:07:45] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Robertson:** The services have very different cultures between them by, by necessity.

[00:07:50] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Yeah.

[00:07:50] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Robertson:** Um, I was in enormously shaped by, I did an exchange tour for a couple of years with the United States Marine Corps, and I flew off carriers and I did Top Gun and NSOC and, and those sort of courses over there. But when you watch how the Marine Corps operates. Let alone the broader US military, there is a lot to learn. There are a few things to be avoided, too, but there's a lot to learn from an organisation like that. And it really shaped who I was and how I, um, how I acted and reacted as a commander, uh, later on.

[00:08:22] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Do some of the service cultures, like within the Air Force, do they, are there similarities with that culture of the Air Force within Australia to other militaries around the world and their sort of Air Force cultures?



[00:08:33] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Roberton:** Yeah, I, I would say, uh, for instance, that the, um, the Air Mobility Wings and the Air Mobility Group within Australia, um, in many ways has by, by design, more in common with the United States Air Force mobility than it does with, for instance, the fighter community within the Royal Australian Air Force fighter communities, especially within the Western Air Forces.

They're pretty similar in what they value in their training types within the discipline. Um, and so the real fun part is when you bring all of them together with, you know, and you're in a Canberra environment with not just different subcultures within your service, but Navy, Army, you know, Australian public servants, uh, contractors, and you're pulling this team together, um, you know, frankly.

It's, um, uh, you know, Ricky Ponting, uh, would comment, it's pretty easy to lead the Australian Cricket team when you've got this team full of rock stars. Actually, when it gets really tricky is when you've got, uh, the Saturday afternoon park team pulled together down in your local community and you're trying to, uh, to work out who's going to do what and to make, to get to the, you know, mission success.

[00:09:42] **Dr Lucas Marie:** That's a great analogy actually. Yeah. Depending on the team. I want to pivot a little bit to an operation, but I actually want to hear about that management of different sorts of, of cultures and teams within, um, within this operation. So, Operation Okra, is it Okra? Is that the Air Task group you worked alongside coalition forces for, from several countries, and the operation consisted of, from what I know, 400 RAAF personnel and, um, a range of aircraft E-7, FA 18 KC 30s, which I think, uh, the largest Air Task Group to deploy from Australia since the Vietnam War. Um, so under your command? Yeah. Air Task Group 630 conducted airstrikes. They flew in support of Iraqi and Kurdish ground force. They assisted in, um, freeing. Is it Yazidi?

[00:10:34] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Roberton:** That is correct.



[00:10:36] **Dr Lucas Marie:** The Yazidi people trapped in the, in the Sinja Mountains. And a recognition of your role in this operation, you were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. Um, I was reading this transcript about that deployment, and I just wanted to ask you if you want, if you could speak a little bit about Operation Okra and some of the challenges that you've experienced.

You, you are managing three types of aircraft and, and aircraft crews, and I can imagine that would be quite challenging.

[00:10:55] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Robertson:** There was some unique aspects about Okra, which you've pointed out. That was our first self-deployed Air Task Group since Vietnam, um, never before in the recent decades and in the previous four decades had we, the ability within Australia to, um, stand up a strike force with all of the supporting elements and deploy 12,000 kilometres.

Uh, we did that autonomously without, um, assistance from, uh, for example, the US and their, and their enablers. We did it at fairly short notice. Um, we,

[00:11:28] **Dr Lucas Marie:** what, what's short notice, just for my context,

[00:11:31] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Robertson:** um, you can imagine that across the Australian Defence Force and there, there are, all of the capabilities have certain readiness notices within which they must react and obviously some are shorter than others. Uh, with, with how quickly you can imagine, things like counter-terrorism need to be pretty much ready to go. And some of the, each air transports are very key to be able to launch quickly. Um, roles and scenarios where fighters were anticipated to be used had longer lead times.

Uh, in those days, and this is 2014, but the Abbott government at the time was watching what was going on in Iraq and the Levant, and you know, the massive impact that it was, uh, having over there on, on them, um, and the US call for a reaction to it. And so it was very quick for the US, for the Australian government to um, ask us to actually, uh, deploy into Theatre.

So we. Deployed within 19 days' notice from the government, and we're ready to go on combat operations quickly.

[00:12:39] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Yeah. It does seem quick



[00:12:39] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Robertson:** Um, now we did it with some clear help from the US in terms of weapons that were in theatre and the like, but um, that was, that was a lot to organise because we had to have somewhere to base out of.

We had to work out what support arrangements we'd need, what sort of contribution we could make, how we'd work out, you know, the legal authorities, the rules of engagement, and, you know, collateral damage assessments and the like. Um, and then of course, just what could we sustain, um, over there on, on that sort of deployment.

So in terms of the complexity. It, it was a rapid form of key elements, but the three aircraft that we used were, ironically, it was the first time they were relatively new aircraft, all three of them to the Air Force. I had the great privilege of, um, leading the, uh, super Hornet introduction into service, and stood that up from day one in terms of a project. It was a rapid project done. Under, um, the Howard government, when Brendan Nelson was the defence minister. It was very quickly brought into service, you know, approval in a matter of months and then in service in Australia in just a couple of years. So I not only got to stand up the project and then command the wing subsequently, but then to actually be part of the chain of command in combat.

We had a very good team. The wedge-tail, the E7 wedge-tail, is the world's leading airborne early warning aircraft type, but not used in combat operations. And so deploying it and understanding the footprint of support that you would need and the security arrangements, how we could, uh, facilitate that.

And then the tanker force, we had the KC 30, which again was, you know, I would argue still one of the best of its type in the world for the capacity that you can fit just with the number of passengers on board, you know, supporting, uh, maintenance and support personnel, but the amount of fuel that can offload.

Um, and so that all turned around very, very quickly. We had some C-130s already in theatre. So all of that to say the three different communities and types in our combat support element, the fourth but essential element, um, were well practised but not together, and not formed up into a near task group, uh, and then rapidly deployed and ready to go.



[00:14:51] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Yeah, it's fascinating and I can imagine, like you said, they have quite different personnel, quite different operational kind of readiness, and to have that. I don't know, to be, um, forced to, to kind of be out there so quickly. 19 days seems, seems really quick.

[00:15:07] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Roberton:** Yeah, it was in, it was an exercise in, um, you know, logistics and planning really rapidly done.

But the more fundamental parts where there's no framework in, initially in theatre for, you know, where we were going to operate, how we were going to, uh, synch in with the US, UK and then later French, and then the many European and Middle Eastern ally nations that, uh, that formed part of that, um, unique commander control arrangements, where we're going to operate de conflicting, how we were going to meet the government intent, but do it in a way that was going to meet, you know, the safety and standards and respectful of the differences, fundamental differences, for example, between the United States and the way they applied the rules of engagement, and the way we do in Australia.

[00:15:57] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Can I ask, um, how, how can you do that well, like how do you understand the sort of cross-cultural element of working with those sort of, um, multinational militaries?

Like are there, are there things that you try to bring to the table or is it about being curious and listening? Like how, how can you provide advice for future leaders maybe being in those sorts of scenarios and how to navigate all those sorts of differences of culture, but also differences of knowing where Australia kind of sits within that global stage. How, how do you navigate those sorts of complexities?

[00:16:28] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Roberton:** Um, it's, it, it's a great question, and it goes to the fundamental, um, underpinnings of successful command, and especially for military leaders within the Australian environment. It really comes down still to relationships and building those quickly or leveraging those that already exist.



We have great longstanding exchanges with the United States, United Kingdom, especially between, um, you know, between, uh, aircrew engineering support logistics. So having that understanding of how they operate and how we operate is a good starting point. The exercise infrastructure that we do annually is very important, but getting over there in Theatre, being able to sit down and quickly ascertain not just sort of what's important to you and your nation, but where are the red lines? And this is what's important to us. And having very candid, professional, nonpartisan, non-culturally biased conversations is important.

One of the secondary roles that I ended up having is the inaugural commander, which was probably the most important thing that I did, but not really related to the Australian aspect. As the operation went on and started to mature, there was the, um, the United States and the, uh, UK just before us, the France, the French were already in theatre, but um, came on board and started operating and in the counter ISIL strike as a coordinated, um, group just after Australia.

We subsequently had about another 13 nations join. Nations from Europe. So you know, the Dutch, Danes, all matter of folks from the European Theatre as well as a whole bunch of nations within, um, the Middle East itself. Very, very different national objectives. Very, very different cultural backgrounds, and of course, alignments or loyalties to different factional groups on the ground.

This was largely Sunni vs. Shia, to oversimplify the issues. But that played out very, very importantly because the, uh, the ground commander, Iraqi forces that were clearing the strikes. May not have necessarily been aligned to the areas where, where you were striking. Uh, so all of that to say a lot of the nations wanted to be sort of aligned, and the US, being very clever, um, delegated to me as the Australian inside the Five Eyes, but no sort of colonial baggage that the UK might have had, and I ended up coordinating the international leaders of the air task groups only of the, of the Air Forces. Um, and literally sat down in a room from day one, just went around the table, what is your country trying to get out of this? What do you want? What are the going to be, the restrictions? And we had a very candid conversation in largely broken English and a little bit of French at times, which I struggled with.



And it was a fascinating experience. And then we ended up doing that weekly to say, how are you going? How do we make, like, in order for us to succeed over here, we have to abide by what's important to Australia and the Australian government, the Australian people. Be rigidly, um, enforcing the ethical principles and maintain that social license that we had, but making sure that we're very respectful of what the Dutch or the Italians might want. More importantly, what some of the Middle Eastern nations were trying to achieve and it became just a way, I guess, of, uh, having candid professional conversations that weren't judgmental, but accepting and building that team so that in order for any of us to succeed, we all should.

[00:20:08] **Dr Lucas Marie:** It's so fascinating because I'm an anthropologist. I don't know if, you know, and, um, something that fascinates me is the way in which, you know, we talk about, I, I really love the way in which you were talking about sort of relationships and communication that weren't transactional and influence in the way we think about influencing, uh, others. And I think what's interesting, anthropologically, is the way in which, and you may have experienced this, how others are trying to influence you.

I find that fascinating within specifically that context because yes, you're trying to build authentic kind of relationships, open lines of communication, but how do you, and maybe what advice do you have to future leaders of how to navigate the complicated space of, Hey, I'm trying to influence others because we have a, a nation state mission and but they do as well and that can get very tricky in terms of, um, knowing when you are being influenced or knowing when you are being, you know, you're not given all the information or you, you are, you're, you are thinking that maybe this person is trying to, you know, they think about Australia in this sort of context and they want us to, you know, speak to these people for this sort of reason.

Like, I know I'm not being very specific, but are there, does that elicit any kind of, um, emotions or thoughts from perhaps your experience working in these multinational sort of environments?

[00:21:22] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Roberton:** Yeah, I think we see it even today in the Indo-Pacific area.

[00:21:26] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Yes.



[00:21:27] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Roberton:** But certainly, back then, the countries quite clearly stated that we want the Aussies to sort of help lead this because we won't feel as intimidated or overseen as we would with the US. But they're inside the Five Eyes. They're inside the, the, the close net. And so we will get a straight shot at what is, uh, what is important, what is not. Um, I think some of the key elements for a commander is just that ability to do a little bit of research; Not a lot. I'd, I'd served in Iraq in oh three previously with, you know, um, with the, uh, the air campaign over there as well. Um. And so had some insight and I had been back there once. I'd had a great relationship with a few folks on staff college, and I knew just enough to know that I did not know very much at all, and just how complex the multiple layers of the Middle East really were.

And so that allows you to go in with a mindset of just to listen and then just build the trust. Trust is built up through transparency. So I would open and say, look, this is what is really important to Australia. This is why we are here. This is probably our red lines. This is where we differ about how can we help for you to exceed or succeed, and how can we make sure that, um, your government will look favourably on your actions over here and contributing to what we all thought was a very very important mission.

[00:22:57] **Dr Lucas Marie:** And that sounds really clear for them. Like, I, I want to help you, but here, here are sort of my boundaries and red lines as you said. Have you ever encountered people that, you know, don't play the same game?

[00:23:08] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Roberton:** Oh, for sure.

[00:23:09] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Yeah. Yeah,

[00:23:09] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Roberton:** yeah. And that, and that's okay.

[00:23:10] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Yeah.



[00:23:11] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Robertson:** Um, the second key element is, I never would take it personally. And some people will get emotional quite rightly, because it's very important to them. Some people have, you know, religious, uh, or tribal affiliations, which, which people that are either suffering or they're being, uh, on the, perhaps on the other side of the problems are being faced there. But I don't, you know, suffer those, uh, that sort of tie in. So you can actually just respect what they're saying. You don't have to agree with it. Making sure that you're hearing it. Repeating back to it for your own clarity so that, you know, in a read-back thing. So, so what I'm understanding is that this is important to you.

Uh, sometimes you'll have people that'll have a conflict situation in, and I'm talking about the military environment, extends beyond that. Uh, and often I would, uh, rather than question the 10% of things that they think they were vociferously disagreeing with, I'd say, so as I understand it, these are the things we already agree on and lay that out about what was important and just find those common areas.

I know it sounds a little bit trite and a little bit kind of Instagram leadership, but it genuinely was the way that you built the trust in the room and uh, and everyone knew that, you know, we would respect each other's views. We'd be very discreet about it and I certainly didn't want them going out repeating what I had said was Australia's position on things. I said, "No, this is my interpretation of what our government wants, and this is how we're going to execute".

All I can say is it became very important in how we pursued the mission over there.

[00:24:43] **Dr Lucas Marie:** No, it sounds like you're very authentic and clear and you adapted well to that, to that situation. You know, some people might want a silver bullet, you know, this is how relationship building happens across a multi. No, you're, you're, you're kind of describing that adaptability and that agility that you had on the ground to kind of make sense of the context and the people that you're working with, and that's so important. I think when we're talking about relationships, and we're talking about people.



[00:25:06] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Roberton:** It came a bit of a personal cost. Those, uh, who have ever lived or served in the Middle East will know I drank gallons of Turkish coffee and ate a ridiculous number of high-calorie dates and would be happy if I never had to face either ever again.

But such was the way that was comfortable for many of the people in the room. And so we, um, we, we went through the process, you know, it was interesting.

[00:25:31] **Dr Lucas Marie:** How challenging because sounds, it sounds amazing. Yeah. Um, I guess I'll pivot a little bit just because we're about 20 minutes in. Um, I hope you don't mind me asking, but it's just been one year now since the Royal Commission into Defence and Veteran Suicide released its findings.

For some context, the final report included 122 recommendations to the government, uh, which formed the Royal Commission's Blueprint, a blueprint for real, meaningful and long-lasting reform. Um, such as improving support for veterans and their families, um, you know, leadership and cultural change as one of the recommendations.

And many of these recommendations revolve around, uh, systemic change to ADF culture. Uh, leadership responsibility, operational support areas where, you know, your experience in the military, command and planning and security and capability development would, I think, provide some valuable insights. Like, um, where do you see as the most critical areas, you know, that the defence force and veteran support systems need a focus, more moving forward? And how can leadership, do you think, at all levels, contribute to a meaningful change in this space?

[00:26:39] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Roberton:** It's a really important national issue. And of course it goes well beyond just the military. I know a lot of our first responders and community service people, and they do, you know, they are, they do serve as, as we do in the military; they don't enjoy the same level of, uh, attention and respect and support that we do in the military.



I think the military is doing a really good job. I think the Australian Defence response to the high commission report has been, has been, you know, genuine and they're trying to make real big changes.

Uh, there's probably, you know, still some way to go. I absolutely acknowledge that. I think at a leadership level, one of the key principles is you don't get to decide yourself what can trigger or cause, um, you know, real concern in one of your colleagues? Uh, I have seen that even in peace time over the years.

I've, you know, I've suffered through, you know, having colleagues and friends, uh, die in aircraft accidents, especially in the nineties. But with my time with the United States Marine Corps and then later with the Navy, and sometimes there were people who were there in support, really hardworking, dedicated maintainers who saw the aircraft off and then have this question even though all logic shows quite clearly, they had no contribution to what led to an accident or the death of, uh, of one of the, one of the pilots. But they carry that burden and I think we are very. We need to be very mindful that sometimes people that are, are operating in, uh, in the environment for instance, in the drone environment at the moment and the number of missions and strikes that we executed, uh, and cleared, but there are people sitting in there in the Combined Air Operations Centre, huge big screens in front of them. And, um, literally watching, uh, death. That is, that can really affect people in ways that may not be obvious to others, and it shouldn't be up to us to judge. I think that's a lot more commonly understood now in a world of, you know, the first person drones and the video footage we see in Ukraine and.

Like, but you got to understand 10 years ago that that did not exist. Um, and um, so, but I do think it's a key tenet of our leadership to make sure we respect that different people are going to react in different ways and what's more, they may not be predictable. Um, and, uh, you know, it may, it may not manifest for some time afterwards.

[00:29:19] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Yeah, nicely said and I, I'm really interested in hearing your thoughts perhaps on, that future of technology and AI and war fighting. Like, what do you see as sort of challenges in that space or, um, sort of any advice for leaders kind of navigating this, this new future?



[00:29:37] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Robertson:** I think, uh, it, it is going to be an enormous change. But so was the bow and arrow, so was the rifle, right? So was the catapult.

[00:29:49] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Um, so the nature, so you're saying the nature of war is sort of still the same in some regard?

[00:29:52] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Robertson:** I, do, I, I just think that the tempo is changing. It's rapid changing very rapidly. And now. The, um, you know, there, there's some wonderful old writing from, you know, centuries past about the, the depersonalisation of warfare by, you know, by the use of catapults and the like.

Uh, I think that the propensity, perhaps the opportunity to be disconnected from the, you know, the application of lethal force is even greater with AI and the rapid movement, and that makes it even more important. That there is a fundamental check and balance of alignment with our ethics, and, and the inculcation of that within the leadership at every step of the way.

So I think the role of ethics and leadership in the modern military is far more important than it ever was, simply because the rate of change and the technology can even more easily make things depersonalised. And I would argue that the, um, you know, there is no greater consequence or that you never get more human than when you're looking at taking someone else's life.

And that's, that's about as human as it gets, and the impacts can be very long lasting.

[00:31:08] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Zed, thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us today. It's been, it's been a fascinating conversation. We've covered lots of the different topics. Um, great to have you at the college and yeah, thanks for joining us today.



[00:31:17] **AVM Steve 'Zed' Robertson:** Thanks so much for the opportunity. I enjoyed it.

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