



The Forge: Lives in Leadership Podcast - Australian Defence College

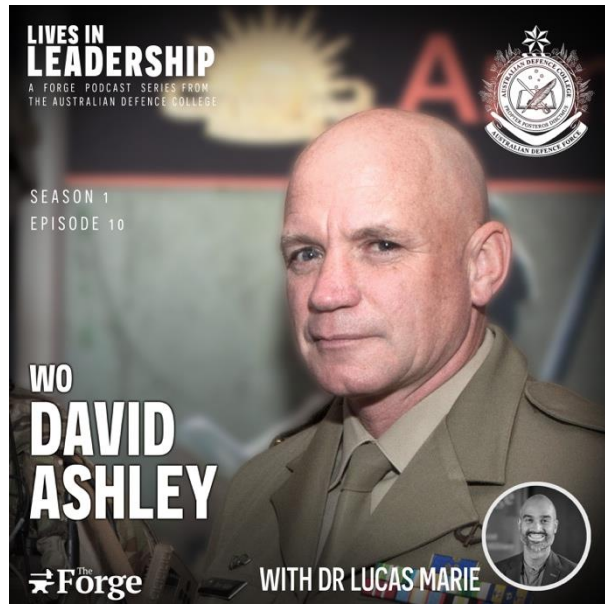
SHOW NOTES

Episode Summary, Highlights and Full Transcript

SEASON 1: EPISODE 10

Guest: WO David Ashley

Host: Dr Lucas Marie



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<https://theforge.defence.gov.au/lives-leadership/season-01-episode-10-wo-david-ashley>

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.



S01E10 – WO David Ashley - Episode Summary

Duration: 34 minutes

Key Themes: military values, enlisted leadership, human dimension of capability, inclusive leadership, command and leadership distinction, tactical vs operational vs strategic leadership, trust, fatigue, future warfare, training, recruitment, strategic challenges, decision making, ethics, senior enlisted roles.

Overview: Dr. Lucas Marie welcomes Warrant Officer Dave Ashley to discuss military leadership in the Australian Defence Force. Dave Ashley's distinguished 40+ year career (enlisted 1979) includes service across multiple battalions (1 RAR, 6 RAR, 3 Brigade), operational deployments to Southeast Asia, East Timor, and Afghanistan, and senior appointments including Command Sergeant Major of Forces Command and Regimental Sergeant Major of the Army (2011-2015).

Key Discussion Points

Understanding the Warrant Officer Role

Dave explains that warrant officers are senior enlisted leaders who hold office by virtue of a warrant rather than the King's commission. Their primary role is to provide a unique perspective to commanders' decision-making and represent the human dimension of capability, particularly focusing on NCOs and the wellbeing of troops.



Leadership Across Different Levels

Dave describes how his leadership perspective evolved across different RSM appointments:

- **Battalion level (6 RAR, East Timor 2000):** 95% tactical focus on soldier and leadership standards
- **Brigade level (3 Brigade, Timor 2006):** More operational focus, coordinating joint and multinational forces
- **Strategic level (RSM of the Army):** Focus on over-the-horizon challenges, long-term force development, and preparing the army for future warfare

Core Leadership Principles

The best leaders, according to Dave, understand it's not about them but about the team. Effective leaders train their people well, trust them with validation, accept that mistakes will occur, learn from those experiences, and create inclusive environments where their people feel valued. When leaders set this environment, their teams respond with unity of purpose and willing cooperation.

Unique Nature of ADF Leadership

Dave emphasizes that the ADF is unique because it's the only organization legally authorized to take human life within the laws of armed conflict. This burden falls predominantly on young people and requires a special type of leadership centred on care for troops. He reflects on the profound impact of casualties like Corporal Stuart Jones in East Timor and multiple losses in Afghanistan.



Preparing for Future Warfare

Dave warns that future conflicts could see catastrophic casualties far exceeding recent operations - potentially 41 deaths in a minute versus 41 over 10 years in Afghanistan. In an "ever softer society," leaders must build resilience through hard realistic training, insisting on standards demanded by combat, and getting out of command posts to be with their troops.

Developing Junior Leaders

Dave stresses the critical importance of the NCO corps - the hallmark of any professional force that can win. Junior leaders (lieutenants, sergeants, and corporals) must be unshackled from administrative tasks to focus on training for war. They need to be prepared for a future battlefield characterized by uncertainty, communication disruption, and limited resupply. The emphasis: be brilliant at the basics.

The Need for Fundamentals

Dave strongly advocates for maintaining core military skills alongside embracing technology. Soldiers must be proficient without GPS, night vision, or other technology that could fail in combat. He defends the continued relevance of bayonet training and close combat, noting that even modern conflicts like Russia-Ukraine demonstrate the need for ground fighting capabilities.

Cultural Evolution and Diversity

Comparing today's ADF to when he joined in 1979, Dave notes the force has evolved from a predominantly white, Christian, male, Anglo-Saxon army to one that reflects modern Australia's diversity. He celebrates this change, highlighting how diversity brings language capabilities, cultural understanding, and expanded human capability. He met an Army corporal from Nepal and an Air Force corporal from China at a recent forum, immediately recognizing the strategic value of their linguistic and cultural skills.



Love of Country

In a candid exchange, Dave and Dr. Lucas discuss what "love of country" means. Dave argues that nationalism shouldn't be seen as a dirty word and that serving the country includes helping disaster victims, training allies, and standing up to defend Australia when needed. He acknowledges the country has problems to fix but maintains that imperfections don't negate the worthiness of serving and defending it.

Learning from Mistakes

Dave admits to making countless mistakes throughout his career. His advice: take more time before making decisions, put yourself in the shoes of those you lead, and keep a personal journal to reflect on daily lessons learned. What matters most is not saying sorry repeatedly, but showing commitment to improvement and remediating any damage caused.

Conclusion

The episode provides invaluable insights into military leadership from one of Australia's most experienced senior enlisted leaders, covering everything from tactical decision-making to strategic force development, the importance of NCOs, preparing for future warfare, and the evolution of ADF culture.



Memorable Quotes

On the role of the Regimental Sergeant Major: *"The role of the RSM at every level is to provide that unique and particular perspective to the commanders decision making process, whether it's a commanding officer of unit or the chief of Army, and to represent and invest in the human dimension of capability. It's about people, whether it's at a unit brigade, a division, a command, or the army."*

On the unique nature of military service: *"We are the only organisation in the land that can be authorised within the laws of armed conflict to take the life of another human being against their will. The police can't do it. Doctors can't do it, and this burden falls on the shoulders of predominantly young people. Then there's a unique type of leadership required for that."*

On learning from mistakes: *"Nobody wakes up in the morning and says, I think I'll make a mistake today. You find out afterwards someone tells you or you realise it. It's not saying sorry every two seconds but actually showing the commitment to making yourself better and to remediating any damage that you may have caused."*



About the Guest

Warrant Officer Dave Ashley brings over four decades of distinguished service to the Australian Army, having enlisted in 1979 and risen through the ranks to hold some of the most senior enlisted appointments in the Australian Defence Force. His operational experience spans multiple theatres including Southeast Asia, East Timor, and Afghanistan, serving across various battalions and formations such as 1 RAR, 6 RAR, and 3 Brigade. Ashley's career culminated in prestigious appointments as Command Sergeant Major of Forces Command and Regimental Sergeant Major of the Army from 2011 to 2015, where he provided strategic counsel to the Chief of Army and championed the development of the NCO corps. Recognised with both a Medal of the Order of Australia and Membership in the Order of Australia, Ashley's service exemplifies a lifelong commitment to leadership excellence, the professional development of soldiers, and advocating for the human dimension of military capability. His perspective on military leadership is shaped by decades of tactical, operational, and strategic experience, making him a powerful voice on the evolution of the modern Australian soldier and the enduring principles of military service.



Resources & References

Military Units & Formations

- **1 RAR** (1st Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment)
- **6 RAR** (6th Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment)
- **3 Brigade** (3rd Brigade, Australian Army)
- **Forces Command** (Australian Army)
- **Joint Task Force 631** (East Timor 2006)
- **Battle Group Faithful** (East Timor 2006)
- **Headquarters 1st Australian Division**

Operational Deployments

- **East Timor (2000)**
 - INTERFET/Peacekeeping operations
- **Timor-Leste (2006)**
 - Operation Astute
- **Afghanistan**
 - ISAF operations



People Mentioned

Military Leaders

- **Lieutenant General John Caligari**
 - Former platoon commander mentioned as exemplary leader
- **Lieutenant Colonel Mick Mumford**
 - Commander of Battle Group Faithful
- **Warrant Officer Grant McFarlane**
 - RSM of Battle Group Faithful

Fallen Service Members

- **Corporal Stuart Jones**
 - Killed in action, East Timor (armoured corps soldier posted to 6 RAR)
- **Corporal Richard Atkinson**
 - Killed in action, Afghanistan
- **Sapper Jamie Larcombe**
 - Killed in action, Afghanistan
- **Lance Corporal Andrew Jones**
 - Killed in action, Afghanistan
- **Sergeant Brett Wood**
 - Killed in action, Afghanistan
- **Lieutenant Marcus Case**
 - Killed in action, Afghanistan



S01E10 – WO David Ashley – Time Stamped Highlights

0:01:33 - What is a Warrant Officer? Dave explains that warrant officers hold office by virtue of a warrant rather than the King's Commission and serve as senior enlisted leaders who provide unique perspective to commanders and represent the human dimension of capability.

0:02:35 - Leadership Evolution Across Levels Dave describes how his leadership focus shifted from 95% tactical at battalion level (6 RAR, East Timor 2000) to operational at Brigade level (2006) to strategic as RSM of the Army, focusing on 10-30 year horizon challenges.

0:06:00 - What Leadership Means "The best leaders always knew it was not about them, but rather the sum of the team." Dave emphasises that effective leaders train well, trust with validation, accept mistakes, learn from them, and create inclusive environments.

0:09:14 - Unique Nature of ADF Leadership Dave explains the ADF is the only organization authorized within laws of armed conflict to take human life against their will - a burden falling on predominantly young people requiring unique leadership centred on care.

0:09:54 - Impact of Combat Losses Dave reflects on remembering every second of Corporal Stuart Jones' death in East Timor and multiple casualties in Afghanistan, emphasising the profound leadership burden of getting soldiers through such losses.

0:11:10 - Future War Casualties "In a war with our next adversary, we could have 41 people killed in a minute." Dave warns about preparing for catastrophic casualties in future conflicts versus 41 deaths over 10 years in Afghanistan.

0:12:00 - The One Standard "There is only one standard demanded by combat - the standard required for combat because for absolute certain, the enemy are not going to give a discount."



0:13:28 - Love of Country Dave argues the only requirement for ADF service is love of country - willingness to take the oath - then it's the ADF's responsibility to train them for war.

0:14:59 - Developing Junior Leaders Dave emphasises unshackling junior leaders from non-warfighting tasks and the critical importance of the NCO corps: "The hallmark of any professional force that can win is an enabled and professional NCO Corps."

0:16:55 - Future Warfare and Basics "The drums of war are beating." Dave describes future total war involving space, cyber, and multi-domain operations but emphasises soldiers must still be "brilliant at the basics" - navigation without GPS, operating without technology.

0:20:06 - Role of Infantry and Bayonet Dave defends the 1947 role of infantry "to seek out and close with the enemy to kill or capture him" and argues there's still need for bayonet and close combat despite modern warfare evolution.

0:23:34 - Cultural Evolution of the ADF Dave celebrates the shift from 1979's "white Christian male Anglo-Saxon army" to today's diverse force reflecting modern Australia, highlighting language capabilities and cultural skills as strategic assets.

0:26:08 - Immigrant's Story Dave shares his personal story as an immigrant from the UK in 1962, serving to pay back Australia's generosity, and meeting another refugee corporal doing the same.

0:28:11 - Nationalism Debate In a candid exchange about love of country, Dave challenges the notion that nationalism is a "dirty word" and discusses the complicated relationship many Australians have with national identity.

0:31:33 - Learning from Mistakes Dave reflects on countless mistakes and shares what he'd do differently: take more time to consider others' perspectives and keep a daily journal documenting lessons learned. "It's not saying sorry every two seconds but showing commitment to making yourself better."



S01E10 – WO David Ashley – - 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 Warrant Officer Dave Ashley.

Dave's career in the Australian Army spans more than four decades. He enlisted back in 1979 and went on to serve across a range of Battalions and formations, including 1RAR, 6RAR, and 3 Brigade. He's had operational deployments to Southeast Asia, East Timor, Timor Leste, and Afghanistan. Dave has held some of the most senior appointments, including Command Sergeant Major of Forces Command and Regimental Sergeant Major (RSM) of the Army from 2011 to 2015.

Dave was recognised with the Medal of the Order of Australia and a Member of the Order of Australia. And his service reflects an enduring commitment to outstanding leadership, professionalism, and the ongoing development of the modern soldier.

Dave Ashley, thank you for joining us today on the podcast.

[00:01:18] **WO David Ashley:** Glad to be here.

[00:01:19] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Dave, could you perhaps just briefly explain to our audience what is a Warrant Officer? You're the first Warrant Officer we've had on the programme and, could you explain what they are, what they do in the in the ADF?

[00:01:31] **WO David Ashley:** Well, it's quite complicated.

[00:01:32] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Yeah.



[00:01:33] **WO David Ashley:** But, it's based on tradition. But a Warrant Officer is an officer by virtue of a warrant rather than the King's commission. And the Defence Force is quite unique. You've got a route of advancement for officers and the parallel route of advancement for enlisted leaders, a Warrant Officer, is basically the senior enlisted leader.

And what does a warrant officer do? Advises. In fact, I reflected on what the role of the Regimental Sergeant Major is, which is a form of Warrant Officer for the Army. And it was to provide a unique and particular perspective to the commander's decision making process and to represent and invest in the human dimension of capability. It's about the people, particularly the NCOs.

[00:02:14] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Wonderful. Oh, thanks for joining us, Dave, and it's great to have you on the programme. When I was reading out your resume, I guess you've served in a range of different roles as a Warrant Officer, um, as we said from Battalion level appointments through to RSM as you just described, of the Army.

How did your perspective on leadership evolve as you moved through those levels of responsibility?

[00:02:34] **WO David Ashley:** Well, here I'll talk about my own input if I could. And I'm not going to say that a Battalion level operation is just a tactical thing. It's operational, but my input into it was tactical. So, here's the difference between the different levels of RSM. Tier A – Unit level, Tier D - RSM of the Army. For example, when I was the RSM with the sixth Battalion, the Royal Australian Regiment, that was a unit level Tier A appointment and we deployed to East Timor in 2000, my focus was 95% on the tactical - soldier standards, leadership standards, things like that. 4% was on the operation.

So tactical is 6RARs operations as part of the wider operation down on the board with Indonesia. The operational part of it was the operations of the entire peacekeeping force. Well, I was interested in that about 4% of the time, only, particularly with the New Zealanders who shared a boundary with us.



And the strategic part of it - well, we were bringing into existence the first new nation of the 21st century. That's a strategic thing, and I could use that to motivate my soldiers. That's what we have to live up to. But then I became a Tier B Warrant Officer, for example, I was the RSM of the third Brigade, and we went back to Timor in 2006.

This time I had a different focus on the operational, a more operational focus, because part of our Joint Task Force 631 included Battle Group Faithful, which had its own RSM, Grant McFarlane, who is also a member of CDLE and commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Mick Mumford. I was there in support, but I left him alone.

But in the operational sense, I had to do things and inputs into, tie the force together. We had a Malaysian contingent, a New Zealand contingent. We had aviators, we had the Navy and the Air Force. So, my focus was different, and when I became a more senior RSM a Tier C, or Tier D, particularly RSM of the Army, it was strategic.

Yes, I was very interested in tactical, very interested in the operational, but my role was about over the horizon, what challenges would face the Army in 10, 20 or 30 years' time? Were we enlisting the right people? Were we training them correctly? Were we developing them correctly? How do we raise, train and sustain the force in the future?

So that, I think is the difference, uh, in the different levels of RSMs I served in.

[00:05:06] **Dr Lucas Marie:** That's a great context for a discussion on leadership across those levels. I think what's interesting to me is that you described a lot about the role itself and what kind of responsibilities you have at those different levels, but how did you, as a leader change between, you know, those sorts of appointments?

Like were there, was there different kind of ways in which you communicated with, you know, the unit or, or the commander that you are dealing with, or the things that you learned along the way that perhaps changed or stayed the same?



[00:05:32] **WO David Ashley:** They basically stayed the same. I'll say it again. The role of the RSM at every level is to provide that unique and particular perspective to the commander's decision making process, whether it's a Commanding Officer of unit or the Chief of Army, and to represent and invest in the human dimension of capability. It's about people, whether it's at a Unit Brigade, a Division, a Command, or the Army.

[00:05:55] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Wonderful. Um, and so what does leadership, in its simplest form, what does it mean to you?

[00:05:59] **WO David Ashley:** The best leaders - doesn't matter if they're Lieutenant Colonels or Lieutenant Generals always knew it was not about them, but rather the sum of the team they led. The people. And here sum, I'm talking S-U-M, in other words, it was about their people. They knew they were, they were nothing without the sum of their team. And I think to an extent, the very few leaders that came up short, and I'm happy to say that we have far more good leaders than bad leaders. The ones that come up short, were more focused on themselves.

So the good leaders, which were the effective leaders, trained their people well. Trusted them with validation. So not blind trust. Validation is just asking questions. Doing battlefield circulations, having an inquiring mind, taking the vibe of the unit and their sergeant major is essential to that, to a system to do that.

They accepted that mistakes will sometimes occur, as always happens in human based teams. They learned as a team from those mistakes and experiences and they and the unit formation or even the army just got better and better. And the best leaders were inclusive. They would include those, they lead wherever possible, even if it was just asking them, what do you think?

And I think if a leader sets this environment in a way of doing business, their people will respond with unity or purpose and willing cooperation. So the boss's plan becomes their plan and the boss's aims become their aims. So, take a unit level, for instance, in a unit with 500 humans working together in willing cooperation, who will create mission success because they're well-trained, trusted, and valued.



And this will beat the individual every single time. And the leader just can't tell his or her subordinates to work in unity or work as a team. They have to personally lead it. Now, I'll give you example. It's an example from my very early past. I was a corporal in 1RAR, my platoon commander was Lieutenant John Caligari. He's well known to your listeners. He retired as a Lieutenant General. When he joined the platoon, he said, "I don't command and lead your sections; you do, I do it through you".

Now sometimes he had to make an instant decision, which you have to in war, you have to in training. You've got no time, but wherever possible, he asks us what we think, what we thought I should say.

He listened to what we had to say. He gave us feedback. He got a bit from me, a bit from them, a bit from himself, and before you knew it, his plan was our plan. So we were able to sell it to our teams. It was really easy to write and give orders afterwards as well. That's an example of an inclusive great leader. The fact that he made Lieutenant General is proof of that.

[00:08:37] **Dr Lucas Marie:** That's a wonderful answer, and I like how you've described maybe how that looks like in practise or some of the qualities of a good leader. It makes me think about a conversation that we've had off mic before about, you know, what makes a leader unique within the Australian Defence Force compared to other organisations.

Are there things from your experience, whether it's. You know, as a senior enlisted or the leaders that you've seen, you know who are commissioned, that there's qualities or attributes or practises that they have that make them, that make leadership different within this organisation.

[00:09:12] **WO David Ashley:** Its care for the troops. I believe strongly that the ADF is a unique organisation. I'm not saying we're all the only organisation where there's massive stress, but we are the only organisation in the land that can be authorised within the laws of armed conflict to take the life of another human being against their will. The police can't do it. Doctors can't do it, and this burden falls on the shoulders of predominantly young people. There's a unique type of leadership required for that.



[00:09:44] **Dr Lucas Marie:** And, you said earlier it's about, about care for people having to do that role. Is that what you meant by, by care of them? Kind of understanding the context of that?

[00:09:54] **WO David Ashley:** Yeah. I'll give you an example. The death or wounding of a mate has a severe impact on the force. So, I remember every second of every day in East Timor when Corporal Monster Jones was killed in action.

[00:10:07] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Can you just describe who that was?

[00:10:09] **WO David Ashley:** Corporal Monster Jones was an armoured corps soldier, posted to Sixth Battalion, and he was killed in operations in East Timor. It had a, a severe effect on me. You can imagine the effect it would've had on his mates.

I remember in Afghanistan. Even though I was one level detached from this, they were still in what the Americans call the Battle Space. Its still there, the deaths of Corporal Richard Atkinson; Sapper Jamie Larcombe, Lance Corporal Andrew Jones, Sergeant Brett Wood, Lieutenant Marcus Case.

I felt that to get some, a soldier in a unit through those deaths takes a special form of leadership. That's just one example of the burdens that are placed on leadership in the ADF.

[00:10:50] **Dr Lucas Marie:** It's interesting to think about because I think you're right, there is a unique context. I mean, I think a lot of organisations have unique contexts. I've spoken to you, in the past I've worked for the, for emergency services and it's a pretty unique context. You know, I'm not saying it's the same as the ADF, not at all. But, it requires a different sort of leader there than it does...

[00:11:10] **WO David Ashley:** it's going to get worse and worse because in take Afghanistan or the Middle East, generally, we had 41 people killed in action in 10 years.



We had several hundred wounded and thousands more affected in other ways. In a war with our next adversary, we could have 41 people killed in a minute, killed in a minute. So, in our ever softer society, how can we build into our people through leadership, the resilience to withstand the rigours of war in combat?

But as a leader, you need to be there with them and for them you need to get out of the Command Post and get into their shoes from things like battlefield circulation, which is hard to do in war because there's a massive overhead to it. But you need to do it. You've got to insist on hard realistic training and don't compromise and physical and moral standards.

You know, we talk about standards all the time. There is only one standard demanded by combat. And that is the standard required for combat because for absolute certain, the enemy are not going to give a discount.

[00:12:11] **Dr Lucas Marie:** You said in the beginning of that answer, and I really like what you said, but you did say that, um, in an ever softer society. Do you feel like we are living in a society now that is a bit, as you said, soft?

[00:12:22] **WO David Ashley:** Oh, we are. I'm an old man, 66 years old. I remember when I was a kid we used to walk to school pedal bikes. It's all electric powered bikes now. We used to be able to withstand rigours. I don't think society can withstand now. It doesn't mean that we can't get ready for war. We can. We just have to remember, I think personally the gap is greater.

[00:12:43] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Hmm. Interesting. I, I would say, I respectfully disagree. I think we do live in a society that's dealing with a lot of global sort of turmoil, whether it's a financial, you know, comfortable comfortability that used to be there.

[00:12:56] **WO David Ashley:** There's nothing, there's, there's no reason we can't train them to be tough and resilient. We've just got to train them to be tough and resilient. We just can't say, we're just going to take you straight off the street and throw you into the battle space. It doesn't work that way. There's a burden on leadership.

[00:13:08] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Yeah. And the ADF is going through different ways to try to recruit different, like, you know, wider, um, parts of our society. And it's interesting the way it goes about doing that or who it targets or, kind of like you



said, what kinds of, what kinds of environments are we putting young people into and are we prepared and are we training them correctly for that environment?

[00:13:28] **WO David Ashley:** And we can if the trains, but you know, the only thing that we need for service in the ADF is the love of country. Someone who's prepared, who loves their country, and to prepared to put up their right hand and say, "I the person described in this form do swear and affirm." Then it's up to us to train them for war.

[00:13:48] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Talking a little bit about war, you know, you've, um, you've already mentioned about East Timor and Afghanistan, um, that you were deployed to those countries. What leadership lessons stand out from those operational environments to you, Dave?

[00:14:00] **WO David Ashley:** Well, we've just got to remember that war is a brutal place, and it's very human. Again, it goes at that human dimension of capability I mentioned before. And I've spoken already about the death or wounding of a mate. The fact that we have to take, unfortunately, human life within the laws of armed conflict and do in a way that minimises collateral damage.

[00:14:20] **Dr Lucas Marie:** And so, can I ask a little bit about what you've talked about human ac a few times and you've talked about it the early on. It was about care for understanding of people. What does, what does it mean for you in, in this sort of context?

[00:14:32] **WO David Ashley:** Each team, you've got to care for your own troops, but you've also got to care for non-combatants, and you've got to care for the enemy as well. The rules of engagement, the laws of armed conflict, the Geneva Convention, it's care for everyone in the battle space.



[00:14:46] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Are there any other lessons from those operational environments, like specific ones that you experienced, perhaps a memory of or a particular moment that, that kind of comes to mind when you think about challenges in those environments?

[00:14:59] **WO David Ashley:** Well, we talk about preparing our troops for war and for me as the RSM, it's the human dimension of capability, particularly the NCOs. So one of the things we talked about before was how can Army best develop leadership among junior NCOs and soldiers today? I think it goes to your question, it's simplistic, but we need to understand what a future battle space will look like.

And we need to prepare our junior leaders to face that challenge. And junior leader, junior NCOs are not our only junior leaders. I think from the Army context, junior leadership is leadership in the platoon or troops space. The lieutenant, the sergeant, and the corporal. If a lieutenant acts like he's a general, by the way, or if a lieutenant acts like she's a general, when they're a lieutenant, they're likely to become a cropper.

So if they get it right in the junior leader space, because more senior leadership are guiding them and developing them one day, they may become that general. We also need to unshackle our junior leaders as much as possible from task and responsibilities that take them away for war, from war fighting or training for it.

The platoon sergeant, for instance, should be training the platoon for war, not bogged down with matters, not related to beating the enemy on the battlefield. And I just want to say about the importance of the NCO core, if I can. The hallmark of any professional force that can win is an enabled and professional NCO Corps.

That's it. Uh, you see this between Russian and Ukraine. Now the Russians don't have an NCO call and they're getting hammered on the battlefield because the junior leader and the RSMs, uh, got a responsibility to, to develop that junior leader. They're the ones with the lieutenants and sergeants that turn orders into action.

You can give all the orders you like. If you don't have anyone to turn into action, you're probably going to fail.



[00:16:44] **Dr Lucas Marie:** So this is a question I haven't asked, but you kind of went to it about how the army can best develop. Leadership amongst its junior NGOs and soldiers. And I think it's a good question.

[00:16:53] **WO David Ashley:** If I can keep going. Yeah.

[00:16:54] **Dr Lucas Marie:** yeah, go for it. Yeah.

[00:16:55] **WO David Ashley:** I think it's called the drums of war. They're beating and a war with our next enemy will be a total war. Very different from East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan, not just the casualties that we may face. The next war may have very more dimensions, outer space, deep underwater, land, sea and air, cyber, weapons of mass destruction.

But there'll still be a place for the bayonet. We've seen that in a war between Russia and Ukraine, and as we've seen with Russian and Ukraine or with Israel and Hamas, for that reason, war still involves much death and destruction for both combatants and non-combatants. The next war will also be characterised by much uncertainty in what they, I think they call it the fog of war.

So, we need to teach and enable our junior leaders to think and act for their small teams, because we won't have any communications or access to resupply. So right now we have soldiers that might say, well, I've got a ration pack. I don't eat half of it I'm going to leave it behind. They can't do that. Because one day that fruit bar that they can't stand might end up being their rations for an entire day.

If the platoon sergeant can find just a bit of space to put one more belt of ammunition in, it could make all the difference in the future. So we need to teach our, enable our junior leaders to think and act for their small teams, and we must train and enable them and exercise them. To be brilliant at the basics.



Now, that is an aspirational thing because I've never met a brilliant soldier and I've never met a brilliant person. You come close though, but we need to get as close as possible. For example, we've got a lot of technology now, and I'll give you one example of technology. Global positioning systems. Last time I went field only, last a year, I still occasionally go and see the soldiers.

I've got a wrist held global positioning system. I knew, look at it, it tells me where I am. I want to go somewhere. I just feed in the coordinates. It tells me how to get there. No GPS got no satellites taken out from the enemy. We've got no GPS. I've still got to go back and then use a resection - just like I'm taught in basic trainer to find my location. I've got to be able to read a map, set a bearing on my compass, and choose a route to get me to my next objective. Night vision goggles. We run our batteries and we, because there's no resupply, we've got to be able to operate at night without those. We've got to be brilliant at the basics or as close as we can.

And so our training then particularly our exercises, need to simulate this uncertainty. The company quarter master sergeant in war is unlikely to resupply you with fresh water every 24 hours. He drives on the road; he's going to be targeted. And there'll be no Porta-Loos. So, we've got to go back to digging field latrines, just like we did in World War Bloody one, and regardless of so-called technology, but we need to embrace it as it helps us prevail on the battlefield. I'll say it again. This is about toughness. There's still a need for the bayonet.

[00:19:48] **Dr Lucas Marie:** And when you, when you say a need for the bayonet, do you really mean that there's still a need for army particularly? Because you did mention about army training or army leadership to focus perhaps on a sort of ground offensive as a primary.

[00:20:01] **WO David Ashley:** Of course.

[00:20:02] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Yeah. Because you did mention as well, and we, you know, we are on an island state,



[00:20:06] **WO David Ashley:** You know, we change things, we change things all the time. I'm an infantry soldier in the army. I don't know how this comment will be taken by others. I think it was in 1947 we developed a thing called the role of infantry "to seek out and close with the enemy to kill or capture him, to seize and hold ground and repel attack by day or night, regardless of season, weather or terrain".

I'm probably the only person being interviewed on this who's ever said the word kill, by the way, that's what we bloody do. Within the laws of armed conflict. We close with the enemy and kill him. We may have to use a bayonet in the future. I'll tell you a story. When I was RSM of the Army, a CO wanted to stop bayonet fighting because the CO believed it was teaching aggression. You can't win in a war unless you're aggressive, but it's controlled, legal, ethical aggression. We've got to know the difference.

[00:20:57] **Dr Lucas Marie:** I don't disagree with that, but I, um, it's interesting because you made the point earlier and I think it's a good one. About the changing nature of modern warfare. And we are in Australia, we're not in the north European continent, where some of our adversaries are on the same kind of land continent as us. And in a way it's interesting in this modern environment, which you did say cyber space, other sorts of maybe attacks that we should be prepared for. Do you think the army having this identity of a ground offensive makes it challenging for them to adapt to a more modern, contemporary war fighting?

[00:21:33] **WO David Ashley:** No, we, we are showing adaption all the time. We just got to remember our basics. There's only one thing certain about the next war and that thing is that we don't know anything for certain. The idea that we won't end up in a Pacific Island face to face with an enemy, we run out of ammunition, and we have to draw our bayonets. It could happen. So, we need to train for it. That role of infantry I read out before could be the role of the defence force. That's what we do.

[00:21:59] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Right.

[00:22:00] **WO David Ashley:** An enemy fleet. We seek out and close with that fleet. We destroy that fleet.



[00:22:06] **Dr Lucas Marie:** I guess. And I'm not an ADF member. You know, and I'm, I come from the outside a little bit, but, but I'm just, but

[00:22:11] **WO David Ashley:** the whole idea

[00:22:11] **Dr Lucas Marie:** just for one sec, but I'm, I, I'd be worried that if we spent too long training men and women with the bayonet that we're not training them for the more likelihood of a, say a cyber kind of war or a, you know, a war that's, that looks differently, what would you, what would you say to that?

[00:22:26] **WO David Ashley:** I would say this, if we unshackle our leadership from things not pertaining to war fighting, we'd have time for everything.

[00:22:34] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Yeah. I guess it just depends on what, because I, I was thinking of that, of the war fighting context of, of that.

[00:22:38] **WO David Ashley:** Yeah. The drums of war are. We have to prepare for the next war now, but the idea that you can say the next war won't include a bayonet. We we're not going to train in bayonet fighting. If you get the basics right, you can do everything. But if you just focus on one area and then you need to go back to the basics, you won't have it.

So the idea being we've got global positioning systems. We no longer have to teach navigation. That is ludicrous. Just remember our basics. 'cause if we get the basics right, everything else will fall into place and I know the audience is probably Colonels and Brigadiers and all that. That's the environment you set. Get the basics right. Be brilliant at the basics, whether you're the Navy, the Army, or the Air force.

[00:23:20] **Dr Lucas Marie:** You joined in 1979 as I read out earlier, and it's a very different army than the one that perhaps exists today. What cultural shifts stand out most to you from your journey, or for better or worse really?



[00:23:34] **WO David Ashley:** Well, much is also the same. War is still kill or be killed. We've seen that right around the world now. It's kill or be killed. But I think today there's a lot more for the junior leader in particular to consider far more. When I was a, a corporal in 1RAR, for instance, the first battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, I had to know my, I'm going to say it, know my shit.

In other words, be technically proficient, be fit, and be aggressive. We expect so much more of our people these days. Technology, the use of all autonomous systems to inflict lethal effects on the enemy or on us as well, such as drones, and in particularly the changing face of the ADF. When I joined the army in 1979, we were a white Christian, male Anglo-Saxon Army.

We had some great indigenous soldiers. We had the woman's Royal Australian Army Corps, but now we more reflect the changing face of our nation. We should embrace that. That's a good thing, not a bad thing. I'll give you an example. I've just attended the CDF NCO leadership forum, and I met an army corporal from Nepal and a Air Force Corporal from China straight away.

What does that give us? Two sets of language capabilities, but the challenge now is how, for instance, can we provide chaplaincy support to a Defence Force that comes from all around the world with all these different religious backgrounds. Can we do that? We've got to make sure that when we have, I spoke about ration packs before that we have ration packs that everybody can eat.

It's not a bad thing; it's a good thing. But if we embrace that, we embrace, the face of Australia, that comes with huge human capability, and our leaders must accept that. That's a good thing. The other thing too, there's more of a 24 hour battlefield now. In 1979, we used to patrol; come dark, we'd call it, we'd go into a harbour, which is like a defensive position.

These days we're 24 7. 24 7. So this is not really about answering your cultural thing, but this 24 hour battlefield means that we have to manage fatigue. We have an exercise. You go for seven days, you know you're coming back on Sunday. A war ends when it ends. It can last for months. So there's a huge, that's just another example of the burdens and responsibilities put on the junior leader of today that may not have been on the junior, junior leader.



[00:25:54] **Dr Lucas Marie:** And I think it is a cultural difference actually, like a difference of, of a more modern time, which definitely is a difference defence culture today that people have to work and...

[00:26:05] **WO David Ashley:** you know, I'll, I'll tell you another story if I can.

[00:26:07] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Yeah, go for it.

[00:26:08] **WO David Ashley:** One of the reasons, um, I didn't join the Army for this reason, but I realised it was one of the reasons I was staying in the Army.

I'm an immigrant, myself, and my family ran from basically poverty in the UK. We came out here in 1962. I was really proud to serve 'cause I was paying this beautiful country back for the generosity given to me and my family. I visited headquarters, 1 Australian Division in the field last year, and I met another corporal who was a refugee. A refugee saved by Australia, and that person was paying Australia back. And we are getting all those cultural skills, the language skills. It's a great story, I reckon.

[00:26:48] **Dr Lucas Marie:** and you like, you're right. There is, more roles for women. There's more roles for indigenous Australians. There's more roles for different, um, nationalities who perhaps have got residency in this country recently. I know there was a recent change to enrolments. Has this also changed, like you said, the ADF culture, that the differences of diversity, of opinions, like you said, languages, food? Are there other things that have changed from that?

[00:27:13] **WO David Ashley:** Of course, we've changed our uniforms.

[00:27:15] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Right.



[00:27:16] **WO David Ashley:** 50% of our nation are women, and so if we block off recruiting from all parts of Australia. We're blocking off what we actually need to defend our country in the future. Because our recruiting base, if we just stick to people like Dave Ashley is getting smaller and smaller and smaller. There's still a role for a Dave Ashley, don't get me wrong, but there's actually a role for every Australian. As I said, all they need is a love of country. A genuine love of country. We will do the rest.

[00:27:44] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Can I ask you what that means? It's love of country has always been hard for me. I was born in Australia. My mum was born in Singapore. My dad was born in in England, but I've never felt a strong sense of nationalism to the country and it's because sometimes... I've always found it complicated to feel a strong sense of nationalism to Australia, because Australia's never often been a place that I've often felt wholly welcome. You know, I was born here.

[00:28:11] **WO David Ashley:** You just said something that I strongly, I think it was bad that you said it.

[00:28:16] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Okay. What did I say?

[00:28:16] **WO David Ashley:** You said about being Australian. You never felt a love of country; you've never felt nationalism. Nationalism is a dirty word now. People, people associated with right wing. It's not, put it this way, Lucas. If an enemy attacked our country or killing our people, would you fight for our country? Would you stand up and fight for our country, even if it's doing what you're doing right now in Defence?

[00:28:38] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Right? Yes. I, I think I do have an identity.

[00:28:41] **WO David Ashley:** Then Lucas, you love our country.

[00:28:43] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Right? But I, I also feel it's complicated and it's what I was trying to get to. I do feel I'm an Australian, you know, I'm a part of this country. It's my identity, particularly when I'm outside of Australia and I feel more Australian.



But I also feel that Australia, I don't really know exactly who it's for, I've often felt a little bit on the outside and it's a complicated one of feeling, oh, I'm going to sign up because I, you know, I feel this strong sense of pride in the same way that perhaps you do, Dave.

[00:29:09] **WO David Ashley:** Well, it's, it's about the community of nations.

[00:29:11] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Right?

[00:29:11] **WO David Ashley:** Right. Go back to Timor when we went there, remember I said bring the first new nation of the 21st century into existence and right now. Like another burden. I want to say this, so I'll probably getting off the track a bit. We expect a lot more from our people now because, and based on what we did with the Australian Army training team in Vietnam, in the last quarter of a century, we have trained and mentored the East Timorese, the Iraqis, the Afghans, the Filipinos, lots of countries in our region.

Right now we're in the United Kingdom training Ukrainian soldiers. We are here for everyone. We've saved more lives than we've ever taken. Through the things that we do with natural disasters and search and rescue. So, when, if you put your hand in and say, I love my country, I'm going to join the ADF, you pay that love back by helping someone out who's a victim of a flood.

[00:30:00] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Perhaps it's maybe just because of, you know, coming, being a sort of first generation Australian to the country that I feel I'm unsure of what the country is, but also, you know, um, a past sort of colonial history is something that, you know. I understand is a part of our history, but it's, it also makes me feel a bit, a little ashamed sometimes to be a part of the, the history of this country that's had that sort of impact on indigenous Australians.

And so I sort of wrestle with that tension and with also having a sort of love and strong identity to the country. And so that sort of complicates my feeling of national pride. Anyway, I'll leave it there because it feels a little personal going into that. But I think a lot of Australians who perhaps maybe my generation or feel the, the same way that I do have still love for the country, but it's a complicated life.



[00:30:43] **WO David Ashley:** I love this country and I've fought for this country and I'll continue to fight this country, but also I feel ashamed when we've got - you sit on Sydney Harbour and see those mega yachts and mansions and you go, what a great country. Well, in the Outback we've got aboriginal communities, indigenous communities, doing it tough. That couldn't be right. We've got things to fix. Just because they're there doesn't mean we can't love our country.

[00:31:08] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Yeah.

[00:31:09] **WO David Ashley:** I would fight for my country. The part of being tough is being prepared to fight for your country. You fight for your family, you fight for your country. We're probably getting off.

[00:31:20] **Dr Lucas Marie:** It's, it's interesting conversation. It's good. Dave, every leader makes mistakes along the way. Is there a moment or decision that you look back on that didn't go as planned? And can you tell us what you perhaps learned from that experience?

[00:31:32] **WO David Ashley:** If I told you every mistake I'd ever made, we'd be here until Christmas next year, but nobody wakes up in the morning and says, I think I'll make a mistake today.

You find out afterwards someone tells you or you realise it. There's two things that I would do differently. So fundamentally, one is I would take more time to make a decision, to say something or to admit to do something. I would put myself in the shoes of those that I led. How would they think? What would their reaction be to what I'm about to say or do. And if I understood that, I reckon I would've made better decisions and made far less mistakes.

The other thing I would've done is kept a journal, a personal journal, not one on that can, not an official one. I would every single day sit down and write, what did I learn today? What are my, sustains? What are my improves, what are my fixes? And that would've made me a far better enlisted leader than I actually was.



So, they're the two things I would do, that I would do differently. But I've made countless mistakes. Everybody has made countless mistakes. But you know what? It's what you do about those mistakes that count. It's rectifying the mistake. Not saying sorry every two seconds but actually showing the commitment to making yourself better and to remediating any damage that you may have caused.

[00:32:59] **Dr Lucas Marie:** I think reflection can be really hard and I, I like what you said. I think having a practise, whether it's journaling or speaking to someone or even some other processes that you might have to reflect on how to do things better I think is really important. And I like the curiosity that you have to, to think, oh, I can't just say sorry and get over it, but I have to think about in the future when I make, when I will make that mistake again, or other mistakes, how do I improve, thinking of it as self-development or as sort of an ongoing journey I think is really important and well said Dave. And it's been great having you on the show and I really enjoyed the conversation. Thanks for joining us.

[00:33:35] **WO David Ashley:** My pleasure.

[00:33:36] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Thanks.

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