



The Forge: Lives in Leadership Podcast - Australian Defence College

SHOW NOTES

Episode Summary, Highlights and Full Transcript

SEASON 1: EPISODE 11

Guest: RADM James Lybrand

Host: Dr Lucas Marie



Scan the QR or use the link:



<https://theforge.defence.gov.au/lives-leadership/season-01-episode-11-radm-james-lybrand-ran>

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.



S01E11 – RADM James Lybrand - Episode Summary

Duration: 39 minutes

Key Themes: Leadership evolution, Submarine command, Empowering teams, Delegation and autonomy, Trust and cohesion, Mentorship, Decision-making, Command philosophy, Professional military education, Strategic thinking, Campaign planning, Humility in leadership, Resilience and adaptability, Confined space leadership.

Overview: Dr. Lucas Marie interviews Rear Admiral James Lybrand, RAN, discussing his 36-year career journey from apprentice aircraft maintainer to Commander of the Australian Defence College. The conversation explores leadership evolution, submarine command, and professional military education.

Key Discussion Points

Career Background and Early Leadership

- Joined the Royal Australian Navy in 1990 as an apprentice, commissioned as officer in 1993
- Served as Commander Task Group 627 and Director of Submarine Operations (2015-2018), awarded Conspicuous Service Cross
- Deployed as Maritime Task Group Commander for Operation Mantel under US Fifth Fleet (2019)
- Held senior strategic roles including Director General ADF Operations and Plans (J3) and Chief of Staff to the Chief of Defence Force



Evolution of Leadership Style

Admiral Lybrand reflects on how his leadership has matured over 36 years, emphasizing:

- The shift from "leading people" to "getting the best out of people you lead"
- Becoming more balanced and reflective with experience
- Learning that leadership is about assimilating information from the team rather than making all decisions personally
- The importance of letting subordinates make decisions and only intervening when necessary

Submarine Leadership: Unique Challenges

The Submarine Environment

- Submariners live in close proximity with no private space except the CO's cabin
- The captain's cabin is only seven steps from the control room
- Everyone operates at the same level, creating direct connection to operations
- The environment demands that "everyone has to get along" due to confined spaces

Command Philosophy

Admiral Lybrand shares his command rules for HMAS Rankin:

- Only the captain delivers external criticism ("my name on the top of the tin")
- Core principles: be efficient, approachable, and adaptable



- The crew takes on the personality of the leader
- Gregarious or reserved styles can both be effective

Leadership Mentors Across Career Stages

Early Career Influence

- **Franco Jackman:** PE teacher who demonstrated selflessness and "service before self" through dedication to students
- **Lieutenant Brian Eagles:** First divisional officer who taught "it's better to be hard early and easier late"

Senior Leadership Lessons

- **Admiral David Johnson and General Angus Campbell:** Both exemplified calmness in command and the power of listening more than speaking
- The importance of assessing an organization before making changes (unlike home renovations that should be done immediately)
- "Two ears, one mouth - listen double the time you speak"

Key Leadership Principles

Decision Making in Emergencies

- "The first information is never correct" - wait for the second update
- Just because information is repeated doesn't make it correct
- Take a measured pause before acting
- Report facts upward, not interpretations



Observer vs. Participant

- **Be an observer, don't be a participant**
 - particularly crucial for commanders
- In control rooms, the CO should "do something amazing, then get out"
- Don't micromanage - come in, do what only you can do, then delegate back
- Exercise delegation to 100% of capacity, sometimes exceeding it

Delegation Philosophy

- Delegate everything possible to the appropriate level
- People should exercise their full delegation, even if occasionally exceeding it
- Lofting decisions upward within your delegation is "an abrogation of responsibility"
- **"If you work for me, I'll work for you"**
 - go the extra mile for subordinates

Operation: MH370 Search Mission

Rapid Deployment

In 2014, Admiral Lybrand was unexpectedly appointed Mission Commander for the underwater search for Malaysian Airlines Flight MH370:

- Appointed during the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium with minimal notice
- Led Ocean Shield with contracted US Navy assets (Phoenix International)



- Managed complex team: RAN personnel, US Navy liaison, civilian contractors, Australian Transport Safety Bureau, and Boeing representatives

Mission Challenges

- Extremely limited communications bandwidth at sea (20 minutes to log in, 4 minutes per email action)
- Received hundreds of emails daily while operating on minimal sleep
- High-profile mission with near-instant media reporting
- Deployed underwater vehicles to unprecedented depths (modified from 3,000-4,000m capability to over 6,000m through onsite engineering)
- Equipment failure rate of approximately 50%
- Mission concluded in May 2014 without finding the aircraft

Leadership Lessons

- Demonstrates military's ability to pivot quickly and apply massive planning resources rapidly
- The importance of failure management and onsite problem-solving
- Operating in support of civilian authorities (Malaysian government)
- Balancing operational command with intense public and political scrutiny



Military Leadership in Broader Context

Service vs. Other Organizations

- Military operates at the request of civil authorities (Defence Aid to Civil Community)
- Hierarchical structure requires working for subordinates, not just commanding them
- Shared difficult and potentially fatal experiences create unique bonds
- Decisions can have life-or-death consequences requiring constant awareness

Military Agility

- Defence Force must be flexible to handle diverse missions: from combat operations to humanitarian assistance to disaster relief
- Training value comes from varied deployment types
- Core principle: "We are a service and we are providing a service"

Role of Education: Australian Defence College

As Commander ADC, Admiral Lybrand oversees:

- Organization of ~850 staff processing 10,000-12,000 students annually
- Five major divisions: War College, warfare training, leadership and ethics (CDLE), Defence Force Academy, and Defence Education Learning Training Authority



Educational Philosophy

Initial Officer Training: Formative experience that sets career trajectory

- Quality of training and leadership modelling is crucial
- Students must understand the commitment and difficulty of military service

Mid-Career (Command and Staff Course):

- Focus on thinking, not tactics or manoeuvre
- Master's level program emphasising planning capability
- Preparing for command and staff positions

Senior Leadership (Defence Strategic Studies Course - DSSC):

- Understanding one's role as a lever of national power in the DIME framework
- Military ("M") is normally lowercase until it becomes critical - then it becomes capital
- When governments commit forces, decisions come "late" because they're hard decisions in national interest
- After military action, must revert back to other levers of national power

Campaign Thinking

- Graduates should understand campaign planning beyond just military campaigns
- National efforts require understanding: how to enter, execute, and exit
- Leadership at strategic level requires collegiate, balanced approach with humility
- Building cohort understanding across services and agencies



Reflections on Success and Fulfillment

"Shawshank Redemption Moments"

Admiral Lybrand describes rare career moments when you can "sit back and appreciate" what you've achieved with your team:

- Not about personal achievement, but seeing the organization and people succeed independently
- Particularly evident in submarine command watching complex human and mechanical systems perform excellently
- "Command is not about you, but it's a little bit about you. Leadership is all about you."

Season One Conclusion

Dr. Marie closes the podcast's first season, highlighting the diverse military and civilian leaders featured and their insights into service, leadership, and navigating modern military complexities. The podcast will return in 2026 for season two with new guests and perspectives.



Memorable Quotes

On Taking Time to Assess: *"Being a leader is not like moving into a new home and doing renovations. You need time to sit and assess what's going on in an organisation and make no change and see how it's running first, only then at some later stage to make the changes that you think need to happen."*

On Early Leadership Lessons: *"It's better to be hard early and easier late. You cannot turn that around."*

On the Evolution of Leadership: *"Operational or tactical level leadership is not about you leading people, it's about getting the best of people you lead."*



About the Guest

Rear Admiral James Lybrand, RAN, brings over three decades of distinguished naval service spanning tactical submarine operations to strategic defence leadership. Beginning his career as an apprentice aircraft maintainer in 1990, he was commissioned as an officer in 1993 and joined the submarine force, where he would spend formative years developing his leadership philosophy in the unique environment of undersea warfare. His operational excellence was recognized with the Conspicuous Service Cross for his role as Commander Task Group 627 and Director of Submarine Operations between 2015 and 2018, overseeing the planning and execution of Australian submarine operations and underwater warfare. In 2019, he commanded the Maritime Task Group for Operation Mantel under the United States Fifth Fleet and gained international recognition as the Mission Commander for Ocean Shield during the 2014 search for Malaysian Airlines Flight MH370 in the Indian Ocean. His deep operational expertise informed senior strategic appointments including Director General ADF Operations and Plans (the J3 at Joint Operations Command) and Chief of Staff to the Chief of Defence Force. Now serving as Commander of the Australian Defence College, Admiral Lybrand leads the professional military education enterprise responsible for developing the intellectual edge of defence's future leaders across all services, bringing his hard-won insights on calm leadership, delegation, and the balance between observation and action to shape the next generation of strategic thinkers.



Resources & References

HMAS Nirimba - Naval training establishment where Admiral Lybrand completed early career training

HMAS Rankin - Collins-class submarine commanded by Admiral Lybrand (referenced as "Page Master Chano" in transcript)

HMAS Ocean Shield - Vessel used for the MH370 underwater search mission

HMAS Stirling - Naval base in Western Australia that served as task force headquarters during MH370 search

Task Group 627 - Submarine task group commanded by Admiral Lybrand

Operation Manitou - 2019 Maritime Task Group deployment under United States Fifth Fleet

Joint Operations Command (JOC) - Where Admiral Lybrand served as Director General ADF Operations and Plans (J3)

Australian War College - Senior officer education institution

Australian Command and Staff Course (ACSC) - Mid-career professional military education

Defence Strategic Studies Course (DSSC) - Senior leadership and strategic planning course

Capability Management College - Defence capability development education

Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) - Naval conference being held when MH370 disappeared



S01E11 – RADM James Lybrand – Time Stamped Highlights

2:32 - Leadership shift from leading people to getting the best out of people

4:30 - Seven steps from cabin to control room: submarine leadership intimacy

9:30 - Better to be hard early and easier late

9:58 - Leadership requires patient assessment before making changes

10:39 - Calmness in command: listen double the time you speak

12:03 - Shawshank Redemption moments of leadership fulfillment

14:03 - First information is never correct in emergencies

16:01 - Be an observer, not a participant

17:29 - Do something amazing, then get out: avoiding micromanagement

20:29 - If you work for me, I'll work for you

24:02 - Unexpected appointment as MH370 Mission Commander

28:49 - Limited communications challenge during high-profile search

35:18 - The M is small in DIME until it's not: military as lever of national power

.



S01E11 – RADM James Lybrand - Full Transcript

[00:00:00] **Dr Lucas Marie:** My name is Dr. Lucas Marie, and today's guest is someone who needs no introduction here at the Australian Defence College. I'm joined today by Rear Admiral James Lybrand.

James joined the Royal Australian Navy directly from school in 1990, beginning his career as an apprenticed aircraft maintainer before being commissioned as an officer in 1993 and joining the submarine force.

He was subsequently employed as Commander Task Group 627, Director of submarine operations, which involved the leading planning and execution of Australian submarine operations and underwater warfare between 2015 and 2018. For this role, he was awarded the Conspicuous Service Cross. In 2019, he was deployed as the Maritime Task Group Commander for Operation Manitou under the United States Fifth Fleet.

He holds deep operational and strategic decision making expertise from his roles as Director General ADF Operations and Plans. That's the J3 at Headquarters JOC (Joint Operations Command), and as Chief of Staff to the Chief of the Defence Force. Now as Commander of the Australian Defence College, or COMADC, as it's more commonly known around here, he leads the professional military education enterprise responsible for delivering the intellectual edge of defence's future leaders.

Rear Admiral Lybrand welcome to the Lives and Leadership Podcast, and thanks for joining us today.

[00:01:30] **RADM James Lybrand:** Thanks for having me, Lucas.

[00:01:31] **Dr Lucas Marie:** James, I guess the first question I wanted to ask you was how your leadership style has perhaps changed or evolved from your early days in the Navy to your most recent senior command here at the Australian Defence College?



[00:01:43] **RADM James Lybrand:** Uh, look. Thanks Lucas. I was reflecting on that question before I came in and you know, it's very difficult to actually look back at what you thought you were like 36 years ago to now because by like, just like by osmosis you think your leadership probably is the same now as it was back then. But I think in practical terms, one of the significant differences I think is somewhat with maturity and extra ability to reflect on things that you likely or I have likely become more balanced and reflective as a leader.

You don't have actually have to achieve everything all at once to achieve good leadership. And I think having had sort of, you know, some great leaders as mentors, and I know you'll sort of get onto that. Your leadership changes and I think certainly my leadership change probably, at a point halfway through my submarine career when I was a watch leader, when you really decide that that operational or tactical level leadership is not about you leading people, it's about getting the best of people you lead and in that respect, you know, in a control room on a submarine, you have, you know, 20 minds sitting there at once and actually giving a lot over to them to achieve, and then you assimilate the information that they have before you make a leadership decision.

A lot of that comes then to you at a later stage in your career as a Captain when you are assimilating all the information, letting people quite often make decisions and making decisions by veto, essentially. So someone gets on with something and if, if they're okay, just don't say anything. It's only if it's dangerous, unsafe, or is a bad operational decision that you might step in.

[00:03:36] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Mm. Um, you talk about submarines and you've had a lot of experience working on subs. What is leading on a sub like? Is it quite different to other environments and can you maybe illustrate that with an example that you have?

[00:03:50] **RADM James Lybrand:** Submarines, even within the Navy, I think is, is a separate leadership challenge. I use a metaphor on a ship. On a ship the crew live within the hull of the ship. Generally, the wardroom is higher above that, above the waterline, or higher up above, sort of what was called "1 deck" and you have to walk to the bridge. You have to walk up to the bridge and have to walk up to the CO.



On a submarine, you're pretty much all at the same level. So, my room, my cabin was seven steps from the control room of the submarine. So, people walked past, not just mine, but a submarine captain's room every day. So you are, you are in it and with it, with people. So, as a result, you are directly connected to the operations, the actions, the movements, the life of the submarine, whether you are in the control room or not and I think that's important for people, because in a submarine you quite literally in a steel tube with other people. And if things go wrong, you go down, you all go down together.

[00:04:58] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Mm-hmm. Were there any challenges of like with certain people or certain personalities or, or just even the missions that you were on that made that kind of environment quite challenging.

[00:05:07] **RADM James Lybrand:** Yeah, look, I think rule number one in submarines is everyone has to get along because you have no private space. The singular private space onboard submarine is inside the CO's cabin, and you have a curtain basically to shut you off from everybody else, but that's about all the privacy you get.

So, you know, there was an ad many years ago that said, we want introverted extroverts for submarines. I don't actually know what that means, but what I think we want in submarines is first and foremost the ability of people to get on with everybody else and do their job. Personal conflict is not conducive to a good working environment anywhere.

And I've said in this role, within this organisation that, you know, as a submariner, my first thing is that all people should get on. If you can't get on, you don't have to talk to the person about anything else other than the things you need to, but you know, you can only achieve results where everybody is doing their part without any particular ego to achieve the activity.

[00:06:07] **Dr Lucas Marie:** It must be hard for some leaders who, who perhaps lead well, but need that kind of distance from the crew or perhaps people they are leading. It sounds like you don't have that luxury?



[00:06:18] **RADM James Lybrand:** Look. I think. You know, individuals have their own personality and character traits. Like there are many, submarine Captains who are gregarious and there are, you know, some who, who are quite personal, quite private, quite reserved. It doesn't make them a worse submarine captain. It doesn't make a person a worse leader. It's just their style, you know. In a Ship, like in any organisation and I, but I think particularly on ships and submarines, the crew take on the personality of the leader. And you will see; you'll see crews do that.

And I had some particular rules in my sort of command philosophy, that I wrote when I became the Commanding Officer of HMAS Dechaineux. One of those was that "anybody can give praise to an external organisation. Only I will give censure", because it was my name, you know, effectively on the top of the tin, so if something went wrong in any external organisation, it had to me, had to be me delivering that. And one of the others was all we need to be is efficient, approachable, and adaptable - everything else will flow from that.

[00:07:25] **Dr Lucas Marie:** That sounds like really good lessons. Um, I'll go back to an earlier, um, question I had and then, and it's about your leadership style; your leadership mentors. I'd love to hear were there any influential leaders that you had growing up, mentors and, and what did they teach you?

[00:07:40] **RADM James Lybrand:** Hmm. Um, many, I, I guess is the answer. And at, at the risk of naming some, because you could forget some, um, I probably will not name too many, but a person I found a great inspiration, um, throughout my life actually is a bloke who was a teacher.

He was a physical education teacher at my school. His name was Franco Jackamantonio. He was the head of the physical education department at Pimlico State High School as a child. And he was invested in the children, so invested in getting, good outcomes for them. He did like frozen drink drives. He was always there at his own time, his own cost, preparing the grounds, making things good for the people who he led, you know, effectively as the physical education department leader.



And I found out later you know, he volunteered, at the convent across the road, used to clean up the convent for them. A great person. So, you know, that is, that is selflessness. And I guess we would say in Defence that is service before self, right? So that's one.

A bloke, my very first divisional officer, Lieutenant Brian Eagles, as he was then, retired as a Commander, ex Warrant Officer. He was effectively my first influence in the Navy and he was a pretty hard guy. And I still see him pretty regularly now. He lives in Canberra. But, everyone thought he was pretty stern, but he was, he was and remains interested in the outcomes of all the people who he had as a divisional officer in the Navy at HMAS Nirimba in a, in a very formative time of people's career.

So people joined between 15 and 18 years of age. One, one of the guys in my class who had turned 15 three days before, and Brian very hard on people and, and he did say at a later stage it's, it's better to be hard early. And easier late, you know, you cannot turn that around. And that is a great leadership lesson. You know, it's better to put the effort in, um, and be hard if you need to be, be hard early, put all the effort in early, um, to then, not coast, but to actually look at what you've, you've set in, place early.

And I think separate to that point, I mean, being a leader is not like moving into a new home and doing renovations. Because if you don't start your renovations within the first couple of months, you're probably not going to do it right because you, you live into it. Being a leader needs time to, to sit and assess what's going on in an organisation and make no change and see how it's running first, only then at some later stage to make the changes that you think need to happen.

If I mentioned, a leader at the, the backend of my career though, who I've taken great inspiration, there's, there's two and they're both the, you know, the current CDF and the previous CDF, current Admiral David Johnson and General Angus Campbell. You know, they offer, um, and who I both worked for directly, um, they offer a calmness in command. I think that's important and the ability to be calm at all times, be still not talk unless you have to, I think is a really significant leadership trait. And Angus Campbell was very much that in everything from senate estimates to a large meeting. He would listen more than he spoke.



You know, there's the, the great metaphor, you've got two ears, one mouth, um, listen, double the time you speak. And I, I thought that was a great leadership lesson for me, particularly in senior leadership.

[00:11:10] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Mm. James, I really liked that answer because I think a lot of people have, that we've spoken to on the podcast have really framed like good leadership or leadership mentors as this one static thing that it just exists from like any age, any culture, any place.

But I like your answer because I think it's so true that different leadership styles are going to work at different stages of your life, and there's a reason for that. You know, you're in a part of the journey of maybe in the defence force or maybe just in your own, you know, personal life. Where, you know, some leadership styles are going to, are going to influence you in a particular sort of way.

And I think thinking about that over the course of one's, you know career or, or their life is, I think it's really is a nice way to think of what leadership we need at certain moments of our career. I'd love to ask, was there a most rewarding leadership moment in your own career that, that you could share with us?

[00:12:03] **RADM James Lybrand:** Yeah, look, I have these moments that I call Shawshank Redemption moments. Um, and it's when Andy Dufresne is sitting on the top of the prison, in the afternoon where he's got the crew and Morgan Freeman and they've, they've done the work, uh, on top of the prison roof. Resealed it, retarred it, and they're sitting down with a couple of beers at the end of it and Andy Dufresne looks back and he's sort of, and he can see what he's done with the group.

So, and I reckon that only happens a couple of times in your life where you can really sit back and go, I appreciate what I've done here, but you've actually achieved what you've done with the people you have, right? So, it's actually not the doing, it's actually, it's knowing that you've invested, um, in the organisation and the people to the point that they can do it themselves. And you can sit back, you know, with that pleasure.



[00:12:55] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Hmm. Is there a, is there a moment that you've had that that's ha that's been like that for you?

[00:12:59] **RADM James Lybrand:** Oh, look, that, yes. Um, but I, I couldn't put my finger on what that exactly is, but it is absolutely related to the, some of them, to submarines and particularly as the CO, and you can see, you know, it is, you know, it is directly as a result of your leadership and capacity to make a very complex human and mechanical system work with, I guess without a whole lot of bureaucracy overhead. Because once you deploy on a submarine, it's you, right? So I, I would say, and I do say, you know, command is not about you, but it's a little bit about you. Leadership is all about you. And indeed, the way you, you offer that leadership up the way you do things doesn't have to be obvious. But, you know, sitting back and actually seeing a highly complex and highly technical unit, like a submarine performing well whilst underway is you know, very rewarding.

[00:13:54] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Mm-hmm. Are there any kind of practises or attitudes or values that you think are perhaps most important in leadership?

[00:14:01] **RADM James Lybrand:** Listen and speak. Listen first, then speak. You, you have to, you know, uh, maybe that comes through seeing an emergency. Um, in an emergency. The first information is never correct. That is an absolute fact. So if you get a call of fire, fire, fire, fire in the whatever compartment, uh, just wait a few marching paces and there might be an update. It might just be smoke. That slow pause, that slight pause to wait to the second amount of information comes as important. And the, the second key is just because you get the same information twice doesn't mean it's correct. It could just be the same information repeated through a different channel. So again, waiting a little bit and being circumspect about what something is before you take an action is, is pretty key.

[00:14:55] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Hmm. That's a, that's a good skill. A bit off topic, but I used to work for emergency services as a call taker, just in between some jobs I did a year for triple Zero in Victoria and I think was fascinating there, the kinds of people who are calling when there are emergencies going on, and how susceptible they are to be influenced.



Like part of the training is to just to ask questions that don't go down any particular, you know, because people are so susceptible to if you say something, they'll say, yes, yes, yes. Just bring the police.

You know, it's really interesting just how people react in those moments and how yeah, you've got to be very critical and questioning about what they're saying because they're really reacting emotionally rather than giving you the facts and. Emergency services is all about triaging and working out what's a priority one compared to a priority three. And so, yeah, it really resonates with me.

[00:15:43] **RADM James Lybrand:** So the, the facts, the facts are key, and knowing what the facts are in a particular discussion is, is really important. And similarly, when you're reporting upwards, only report the facts don't necessarily report your interpretation. And that, that extends, I think, to an operational scenario, particularly for submarines, because of the nature of submarines, you are a surveillance asset.

Very good for leadership is be an observer, don't be a participant. Often, particularly in direct situations, direct action situations where something's required. If you are deep in the participation component, you can't be a leader because you don't have the, the ability to observe from the back end of that and actually make changes. Touching buttons, being deep in an action doesn't help your capacity to be a commander or a leader.

[00:16:27] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Mm-hmm. Is there any, is there any example of perhaps a challenge in that regard? That you faced. I mean, part of this, part of this podcast is to kind of help prepare future leaders for the array of contexts that they might find themselves in. And I think speaking about some of the challenges that we've had and maybe how we've dealt with them is, is fascinating. Are there ones that resonate with you?



[00:16:52] **RADM James Lybrand:** Yeah, I think. When considering that as the, as the captain, you're not always in the control room and as the captain, you shouldn't be in the control room all the time because there are teams there operating six on six off who need to find their own leadership style.

There are officers who are the watch leaders, who need to find how they will manage their own, watch and deliver the information to you. As a CO, you quite literally have the most training and the most capacity and understand, you know, what other tools you can use, to keep the submarine safe more than anybody.

And one of the, one of the things that I think you should do as a CO is go into the control room, do something amazing, then get out. Leave it, give it back to the people who are supposed to be running it. Because if the watch leaders called you to the control room, it's not really just to have a general chat.

Particularly in an emergency, you need to be able to apply all those additional skills that and which, which, and people are concerned in submarines. Because you're pretty deep sometimes and you're pretty close to the bottom. You have to do something that only you can do basically. That being done, finish ready, handover, get back to the watch.

And I think there's a metaphor there for a leader as well. You don't always have to be involved in it. You need to come in, do the things that only you can do as a commander or a leader, and then leave it to the people who are leading at the appropriate level. Not micromanaged. Not micromanaged.

No, absolutely not. Micromanaged. And again, um, there's a part about delegation there. You know, you have to delegate everything you can. To the appropriate level. And at the appropriate level, people should be exercising that delegation to 100% of their capacity or of their, their delegation sometimes over. And again, as if, if it's, that's you, right? So exercise everything within your delegation to limit your capacity. Sometimes over, take a kick for it if you've exceeded it. But then move on, basically. And I think one of the great limitations of people is not exercising their delegation to the fullest.



Lofting up, lofting up decisions beyond well within something they could do to somebody else who's already busy to ask them to make a decision for them. It's an abrogation of responsibility in my mind.

[00:19:11] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Hmm. Is that, do you think there's that unique to military experience? Um, I, I'm, of course, I know there is many other industries or, or work life in which there is that delegation, you know, there is like clear roles, responsibilities, and leaders within those organisations. I'm thinking emergency services now or, or in medicine or another, you know, um, police, there's many, there's many other work contexts in which there is a delegation, but what do you think makes sort of a military leader different perhaps? Or are there, are there things that from your experience that you think are unique to the military in terms of leadership?

[00:19:46] **RADM James Lybrand:** So I, I think all those characteristics do exist outside the military as well. People will not make decisions, to the limit of the delegation. Um. And loft that up to somebody else to make a decision because they don't want to seem to be the person who made a hard decision, who made a bad decision, who made a decision that that potentially could be second guessed.

I mean, the role of leaders is to make decisions. Sometimes you get it wrong. The role of, um, decision makers in, in a combat like situation is to continually make decisions. If one of those is wrong. If you go left rather than what you did, right? It's actually not about turning right, it's about what you're doing after you turn right to then actually try and pick up to achieve the aim, right?

But I think, uh, one of this is good. I think this is important for all, all leaders, but, uh. If you work for me, I will work for you. That is a key leadership trait. And I think in the military we have such a hierarchical structure, and a byzantine bureaucratic system that's hard to navigate that doesn't necessarily exist in all organisations outside.

But, certainly going the extra mile for the people who work for you is key. Um, and that's one of my approaches. If you work for me. I'll work for you, as in I will, I will do all I can to get you what you want, to train you as, as good as I can, so you can succeed in the future.



[00:21:12] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Mm-hmm. Something I've noticed, and maybe just because I'm, you know, outside the military in that regard, is that there is this real sense, you know, we talk about service and you've mentioned it before, and about the close knit of that team and maybe the high stakes of certain missions.

A lot of jobs don't have some of those qualities, or at least to the level that the military or the ADF demands of a person. And that lends itself to, um, you know, qualities that you said, yes, they exist in other organisations, but you know, not to the perhaps high degree that we're talking about. And what I've noticed maybe coming from a university background is that the level of, because of the level of service and the what we're working to protect, there's, and the stakes involved, it lends to a much more, I don't want to say religious, but there's something, it's like we're doing something greater than ourselves and that lends us to sort of lock in, I can't think of another word..

[00:22:08] **RADM James Lybrand:** Yeah.

[00:22:08] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Into that mission in a way that I don't, I haven't experienced in other organisations, perhaps emergency services, one that's more closest.

[00:22:17] **RADM James Lybrand:** Mm.

[00:22:18] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Um, that I see that because of the life and death scenario. Does that resonate at all?

[00:22:21] **RADM James Lybrand:** yeah. And, and I think that that your last point there is, is, is probably key, but you know, leadership, uh, in the military and actions in the military are based on, you know, shared difficult experiences and you know, shared fatal or near fatal experiences so people can understand in any particular unit, but, but certainly a combat or a deployed like unit, like, uh, many things in a deployed air force, specifically in the Army, but on a ship at sea or a submarine at sea, you're in a deployed unit, you're in it together. So that key.



And the second is, as you say, you know, decisions can have significantly adverse outcomes. A death, you know, the, the grounding, the loss of a submarine, the crashing of an aircraft, um, you know, significant, uh, you know, injuries or death in an army, sort of direct facing combat unit. And that's, that's where it all comes to the fore, because you need to make decisions as though people's lives do depend on it, because they do.

[00:23:24] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Um. Yeah. Great. Um, I'd love to ask actually about the crash of an aircraft that, a mission that you were involved in, uh, that was very high profile and international. Uh, for those, just for some context. In 2014, uh, Malaysian's Air Flight Airlines flight MH 370, it disappeared. Uh, it was in the news in 2014 and it was, um, yeah, quite widely covered.

And it was said to have crashed somewhere in the Indian Ocean at the time. Am I right that as Mission commander of Ocean Shield, is that, um, you, that you were in charge of the underwater search for this wreckage of the aircraft? If you could tell us a little bit about what that was like.

[00:24:02] **RADM James Lybrand:** It's an interesting story. There was, um, a naval symposium on at the time, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS). I was the CO of Dechaineux at the time, and we happened to be in dock. Um, and we see in the afternoon the aircraft lost, basically missing and the Chief of the Navy, who was Vice Admiral Ray Griggs at the time, we were having an afternoon sort of discussion with the officers who were involved with that activity. And I remember someone saying, or him saying that we need to find a mission commander for this - it kind of went out my other ear at the time and then later that day someone said, "Hey, you, you are it"

[00:24:46] **Dr Lucas Marie:** wow.



[00:24:47] **RADM James Lybrand:** And the next morning I went and saw, uh, the Chief of the Navy, uh, at back of the hotel again. He goes, ah, mission commander. Um, ready. So, and I guess this is one of the things about being the military sometimes you're not prepared to do something, but you have to do it straight away and you have to figure out pretty rapidly, um, how you're going to do that, um, and what approach you're going to take to it.

Luckily there was the, the Ship Ocean Shield, which we used it was and is a military, I think now border force contracted ship, ship or vessel. So it was in Western Australia, but how to prepare that vessel for the underwater search equipment became sort of what filled our next couple of weeks.

So, bringing that together, involved, really interfacing with the crew. And again, I was the at Sea Underwater search commander. There was a whole Task Force formed; some of it resident at HMAS Stirling, some resident at JOC to do the sort of command and control for the rest of the parts of the search, which, you know, are both surface, maritime, and aircraft.

The components, that came to do that search were effectively contracted US Navy assets and through a company with a company called Phoenix International. Um, so what arrived was a flyaway kit of both, remote, untethered underwater vehicles, um, some tethered TPLs or Tow Pinger Locators, and other search equipment.

Some of that needed significant modifications to the ship to be put over the side and for effect the untethered underwater vehicle was the size and shape of a Mark 48 torpedo. It was designed, I think, if I remember correctly, to go to two or 3000 metres. Maybe we can talk about this later. Subsequently, it went to over 6,000 metres and there's some really on good onsite engineering that, that happened there.



[00:26:42] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Where did that take place?

[00:26:43] **RADM James Lybrand:** On the ship.

[00:26:44] **Dr Lucas Marie:** On the ship?

[00:26:44] **RADM James Lybrand:** Yeah. Basically, yeah. On the ship. Yep. Um, that, but um, and then I had a small team of Royal Australian Navy people to go with us, including some divers, public affairs person. There was a US Navy liaison, I think two people, if I recall correctly, who were in charge of one of the sort of mobile diving salvage units. And then there was the civilian organisation that was contracted Phoenix International. And then we had, two, um, Australian Transport Safety Bureau people and a person from Boeing who came with us as well, as well as the ship's crew.

Um, so all that sort of rapidly being done was very long days to, to get the ship ready and deploy. And we deployed in a southerly direction first, because that was kind of where they thought it went down. We probably only got, you know, 12 hours into that before we turned and headed to the northwest coast and started looking at what became the initial search area for MH 370.

So, yeah, being able to pivot quickly, I think that is, that is probably one of the key things that I'm talking about. And it wasn't just me pivoting quickly, it was everybody pivoting quickly and you can see this is probably one of those great things that I talked about before, seeing how when the organisation turns its mind to do something, the might and weight of a military can actually achieve a lot in a very short period of time, uh, to quite amazing results.

[00:28:08] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Yeah. When it's so high profile, when people want answers.

[00:28:11] **RADM James Lybrand:** Mm,

[00:28:12] **Dr Lucas Marie:** you mean like they can just...



[00:28:13] **RADM James Lybrand:** Yeah. I not just want answers, but we want to do something. Yes. You know, the, the military, uh, all militaries have a huge planning function. Mm-hmm. And turning all that planning effort on at once and all the equipment you can achieve a lot quickly.

So, I mean, going to sea, so it was very high profile. Um, on Ocean Shield, we had extremely limited communications back to shore, and we had limited bandwidth through the satellite communications to the point where I would, I don't remember how many hundreds of emails I received every day, but it was a lot.

And I was awake from about four in the morning till sort of nearly midnight most days, and I'd log on and try and answer emails, but it was about 20 minutes to log onto the computer and about four minutes to do any action on an email. Um, uh, open the email, press reply, start typing, press send was all slow and I would have to do kind of, you know, potentially hundreds of those in the morning.

And indeed, the focus on what we were saying and what we were doing and what we were reporting, that was, that was near, instantly reported back into the media, I think with very little backend filtering, within the Defence organisation because the information was, so critical.

Effectively arriving on site as well, when we finally got the position, we thought is over to the, to the contractor guys to work out the search plan. Which, which was thorough. And again, we had the tow ping locator, which was looking for the pings of the black box, commonly known as, from the aircraft, which only exists for a certain period of time. And then also to do a bottom survey with a, you know, high fidelity, uh, a side scan, sonar or a bottom scanning sonar of the bottom, and looking for particular sort of shapes.

Failure is one of those things that those things didn't work all the time. So seeing, you know, how the, the contracted organisation could go through failure management, and I would say, the underwater vehicle, something went wrong with it about 50% of the time and it was deep. It would take hours to get to the bottom and hours to come up when something went wrong.



How they dealt with that and how they looked through the onsite engineering solutions to get that to Tow Pinger Locator from three or 4,000 metres to 6,000 metres. So, let's just say it was four, you know, that's, you know, an extra 2000 metres which from a pressure perspective is significant. And what they did to that bit of equipment to go and look at the bottom was fascinating.

Of course, ultimately, we spent some months out there looking for that, and we came back on May the Fifth, having not found it. Um, and I guess the counterpoint to this particular week is the Malaysian Government has now announced that a search will restart for MH 370 shortly through a company called Ocean Infinity.

[00:31:02] **Dr Lucas Marie:** and will Australia be involved?

[00:31:05] **RADM James Lybrand:** I, I don't know. But again, actually that's, that's probably, you know a good point is that when we do things, quite often the military will be asked to assist in an activity. And you might think of COVID as one of those examples and Lieutenant General Frewen, who is the COVID Czar, for one of a better word. We do those things at the request, and in support of another organisation. The ADF doesn't necessarily do that for its own outcomes, we'll do it at the request. So, Defence Aid to the Civil Community, another one, we will do it in support of the state or federal emergency management bodies. Because we have the equipment and we have the people, we have the planning to do some of those things.

But, you know, at all times, those actions are done for somebody else, not necessarily for the ADF. We do get some great training out of it as well. But yeah, that's back to the service. I mean, we are a service and we are providing a service.

[00:32:04] **Dr Lucas Marie:** yeah. And but the agility to do a range of different services, it's not like you are, you know, searching for underwater, you know, wreckages and then defending. It, it sounds, it's like such an, like, you have to have such an agile force and flexible force to be able to deal with whatever's thrown at you quickly.



I've just got one last question. if that's okay and just because, um, of your role currently as Commander Australian Defence College, or COMADC as it's more commonly spoken around here. I'd just love to ask you a question about the role that education and training plays in producing good and effective leaders within the ADF.

[00:32:44] **RADM James Lybrand:** Uh, yeah, look, I mean, ADC is an organisation of about 850 staff. It puts through somewhere between 10 and 12,000 students, every year. And we have uniform defence members, Australian public servants and contractors who are delivering that. In the five major divisions, which span from the war college, warfare training and more operational level training, leadership and ethics through joint professional military education, and the Centre for Defence Leadership and Ethics, the Defence Force Academy – so *ab initio* trainees very, you know, specifically, and then the defence education learning training authority, which has functions for the registered training organisation that I'm, the CEO of, and also whole-of-Defence functions.

So, your scope across that spectrum, if I left DELTA aside, is to bring people into the military in a joint training institution, an *ab initio* training institution effectively straight from school and mould them to become military officers. Um, and to the point that I made right at the start when I was an apprentice, some of some, and many of the things that set your trajectory, I think happened in that institution.

So, the quality of the training delivered to people there is key. How they see their leaders, both interact and interact is key. Uh, and knowing that you're actually embarking upon something that is going to be difficult and consuming for the rest of your, potentially for the rest of your life. 36 years, sort of next month for me, um, is, is it.



I went to our War College through the Australian Command and Staff Course and Defence Strategic Studies Course and the Capability Management College. Some of those are about midterm and we aren't a tactical level staff college. We don't teach tactics. We don't teach manoeuvre, um, like many other staff courses do. We teach thinking, um, it's a master's level programme, but people are trying to consider what they will be pre a command and or staff position. And we also want them to be good planners. And in the current strategic circumstance, we will need more planners, you know, for potentially heightened conflict.

For the strategic studies course DSSC, people are embarking on a change in their career to now strategic positions, and I would like people to understand on that course where they sit as a lever of national power. In the DIME, we always see it written as capital letters, D-I-M-E- M being military, I, I think the M is small in DIME until it's not. Then it becomes a capital, a very big capital, and that will always occur late. As I talk about pivoting earlier, you know, you have to pivot quickly to a decision and that's not a, that's not a fault of governments, that it's not a fault of defence leadership. That is because when governments decide to commit forces, they're making critical decisions in the national interest. So they are hard decisions. So, they'll always come late. When the M happens, that gets done and it needs to revert back to a small m because the other levers of national power will take place.

So, I, I would like the DSSC students one to be campaign planners and we are moving that direction. What does campaign mean? It doesn't just mean a military campaign. As we embark on any national effort, there is a campaigning methodology that will need to be adopted, um, to understand how we get into something, how we go through it, and how we come out the back end.

Um, and then I need, uh, or I what not I need. Um, I, I want all of the graduates of that course to understand that they have a cohort. They understand that your, your leadership must change at that level. To be a collegiate balanced leader, but you still need to lead, and you're an important part of that end part of your career, which is delivering strategic outcomes. And then again, even despite your, your potential future rank, that needs to be done with humility, uh, that needs to be done with, effectiveness, and it needs to be done in a very balanced way.



[00:36:58] **Dr Lucas Marie:** James, that was a lovely answer, and thank you for providing that context of not just the promotion courses, but the ADC broadly and about leadership. I really enjoyed this conversation. Thanks for taking the time to speak with us today.

[00:37:10] **RADM James Lybrand:** Great pleasure. Thanks for having me.

[00:37:15] **Dr Lucas Marie:** Hi everyone. Today's episode brings us to the final instalment of season one. Across this first season, we've had the privilege of hearing from a diverse group of military and civilian leaders each offering their own insights into what it means to serve, to lead, and to navigate the complexities of the modern military.

Their stories, reflections, and lived experiences have helped us deepen our understanding of leadership within the profession of arms. Thanks for listening, for engaging with these conversations and for supporting this new ADF podcast as it finds its rhythm and its audience. I'm happy to say that we'll be back in 2026 for Season 2 with new guests, new ideas, and more stories that explore the people and perspectives that shape today's military profession.

Until then, from all of us here at The Forge and the Australian Defence College, thanks for joining us. And we look forward to continuing the conversation next year.

[00:38:10] **Mr Mike Richards:** This episode of Lives in Leadership is copyright Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Defence 2025. It is licenced under a Creative Commons, by attribution, non-commercial no derivatives, 4.0 international licence. Additional rights beyond this licence can be arranged by contacting the.forge@defence.gov.au.

For full licence details, visit creativecommons.org.