

Take on Board Podcast – Episode 237



Transcript – Take on Board Breakfast: Liz Cosson translates lessons learned in the Australian Army to the boardroom

Helga Svendsen 0:00

All righty. Let's get started folks and I would like to start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet. Today. I am on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, and I pay my respects to elder's past and present. And any First Nations people either might be here today, or might be listening to this on the podcast a bit later when it goes to air. Obviously, we have just had a referendum in Australia that didn't go the way that I would like it to go. But regardless, I am still a supporter of the Uluru statement from the heart, and truth and treaty and recognitions. So I support others in the Take on Board community to do the same.

We are going to hear from Liz in just a moment. So I have great pleasure and thank you again to Katie Constantino for directing me to Liz and introducing me so great pleasure in introducing our speaker for today. Liz Cosson, Major General retired Liz Cosson AM CSC. If I had to come up with one word to describe Liz knowing a bit about her experience, I would say service, her incredible service in the army, her incredible service to the community, her work in the public service. And now her work joining the board of RSL Lifecare limited. So she has incredible wisdom to share and incredible stories to share in her life of service. So she's going to very generously share some of them with us today. So Liz, I will hand to you. You've got 20 minutes. And then after that, folks, as you're listening, if you've got questions, feel free to jot them down or pop them in Slido as you go. But know that you will also have some time after this to have a chat again a breakout room about questions anyway. And not for me. You're not here for me. Liz, thank you so much for joining us. And over to you.

Liz Cosson 1:52

Thanks. So my voice coming through okay for everybody. Yep, excellent. And I do tend to talk quite a bit healthier. So please, if you can find any way to shut me up, that'd be good. Just give me a signal.

Helga Svendsen 2:05

I'll try not to rudely break in. But I will if I need to

Liz Cosson 2:09

I don't have a presentation to put up. So sorry. It's just my face. But if you need to turn off your cameras, that's okay. But it's lovely to see all your faces and see body language. It's always lovely when you're able to talk with people that you can see whether something resonates or whether you're actually hitting the mark when you're presenting. So firstly, if I could acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which I'm coming from, which is Ngunnawal country and pay my respects to elder's past, present and emerging, and to thank them for their care of country, particularly here in Canberra, such beautiful countryside that we enjoy. But I also like to take opportunity to acknowledge and thank those who served in our Australian Defence Force. And as you would probably be aware, our First Nations people have served in our Australian Defence Force from the beginning so it is incredible to recognise that service and sacrifice for nation. And I do like to also thank families of our Australian Defence Force men and women, as most of you would know, we can't do the job that we do any of us without our family and the love and support from our family. So it is always important just to, to acknowledge and thank them, which I do.

So I want to thank Helga for inviting me and I loved your reference to your selfish connector in chief. Because I actually had that in my notes to thank you for the work you do for the community, and for connecting all of us and just sitting in the two breakout rooms that I did at the beginning, listening to stories and listening to the importance of that connection. And wow, it really resonated with me, I won't attribute who said this. But when we look at who we are, which I'm going to talk about today and who I am, it is really important that we, some people use the expression of agency, but for me it's identity. Because once you know who you are, it is amazing what you can achieve. But I often find women and I'm one who suffers from imposter syndrome. And you often reflect and think will really how did I get to be where I am? They haven't found me out yet. Will they ever find me out? And I think Helga that's a topic for another day because it's so be in itself, that imposter syndrome and to know that you're not alone, that we all feel it. Anyway, that's for another day.

So thank you for inviting me because I have had a career that spanned about 44 years. And for the most part of that I have been in the military in the Australian Army, and more recently in the Australian public service. And my theme for this morning is just to share a little bit about that life journey and to reflect on some of the events that have contributed to who I am, and as I said, how important it is to know who you are, particularly when I'm looking at my next part of the journey, which is into the boardroom. And I did reflect a lot before I took up my first board appointment, whether it's the imposter syndrome or not, but I know that I've got a lot of deficits, I need to work out how I build those skills now in the boardroom. So anyway, that's something we can tease out. So we'll talk about who I am that identity who and what actually has shaped me through my life events, because my story and my career and highlights, they've had challenges, but I have got some insights

to share and some lessons that hopefully, you can take away and they help you in your future journey. But who I am. Firstly, I love to say that I'm the great granddaughter of a World War One veteran, he volunteered to serve our nation. He was actually in his 40s when he put his hand up to go over to serve with the army and he left behind his wife, Elizabeth Cosson, my great grandmother and his four children. He was injured in Gallipoli in 1915. And he then went on to serve on the western front where he was killed in action on the 7th of August of 1916. So he left behind his widow, and my grandfather who served in the Second World War. But I also had another grandfather who served in the First World War who was 18. And he left country Victoria, very proud history of grandparents. But my father is also a 31 year veteran, he's 92 years of age, he lives on the Gold Coast. So I travel a little bit between Canberra and the Gold Coast. And my brother, he served in the Australian Army for 20 years, my husband has served in the army for over 30 years in both Gulf Wars and also commanded Air Forces in East Timor an issue. Now, I served in the army. So as you will hear a lot of that military history in my family has shaped what's important to me, and what drives my life purpose. So my childhood story, and I think it's important we do reflect on the foundation piece of who we are, because I moved to four countries growing up at 12 homes and seven schools. And I can honestly say I was not a good student. And I sometimes drag out those old school reports who said I talked too much, or that I don't apply myself to my studies, and that I could reach my full potential if I just pay attention in class. But if you look at that, moving all those schools and learning to adapt to new cultures or new environments, yeah, my attention span was not that good. So most of my education and professional developments happened as an adult. Because as you could imagine, as a child, and I have one brother, a younger brother, that's one thing that shaped me, wherever we went, it was always that family unit, because that's what we had, until we could break back into that new environment and establish those new friends, and work out the teachers and what we should be doing. And my brother was a very slight child, he used to get bullied. So that's one thing that from my childhood did shape me the courage to stand up to the bullies. And I faced that myself in my own career that I learned that from a very young age when I used to observe them trying to bully my brother, that the second life event for me as a child was going into boarding school and learning about being away from parents when they were my rock, as a child moving all the time to all of a sudden be separated from your parents, and into a boarding school down in Melbourne. So I'm actually in Melbourne girl, but all that moving and changing, but I always claim to be a Victorian follow AFL follow Kelton and will always be attached to Melbourne, that my family, my parents, my teachers, but my Christian faith has well helped form that foundation for me. And people who know me know that that background is helps him understand a lot of my decisions. And when you get to know your leaders and get to know who you're with working with, knowing who's part of your team, whether that be a leadership team or on your board. It is really important because it helps you know where they're coming from. It helps you understand what's important to them. And when I used to sit in my own boardrooms, in the public service or in the military, what was always important is knowing where people were going to approach a particular wicked problem or particular topic. They know where I'm coming from, because they actually understand what those life experiences have been for me and those core values that I built through that childhood development. And I like to think my core values are about that loyalty, that integrity and that honesty. And that's what I take now to my new board role, which I'll talk about a little bit later. But through that learning through schools, I said to my parents, when I was leaving school that I wanted to join the army, both of them were totally opposed to that idea. They said, There's no way you can get on the army, not a job for a girl, and dad and mom said, No, off, you go to business

college. So I did. And I learned to do bookkeeping and shorthand and typing and I learned to become a secretary, which was often a joke in my later years when I became a secretary of a Commonwealth department. So I say our book ended my career now being a secretary and concluding as a secretary, but quite different Secretary roles. And so I did work here in Canberra in a real estate.

And I believe learned some really important skills that helped me throughout my career. But at the age of 20, I said to mum or dad, I still want to join the army. And they let me go up to Sydney, and do all the aptitude tests, they really didn't think I'd be accepted. They thought that I was too soft, and that the army wouldn't accept me. But guess what the Army did. They sent me a telegram. You wouldn't know who's young who's to think Telegram, they sent me a telegram saying I'd been accepted. And to march into the women's Royal Australian Army Corps school at George's Heights in Sydney, which I did in February of 1979. And at the end of the 70s, were on the cusp of change for women in our defence force, where we could continue to serve if we were married continue to serve if we were pregnant, but less than 10% of the force were women. Only 23% of positions were open to women. It was the first time they had women going through that type of training that we were going through, they had to learn a lot about women. And I'm very proud of the course that started that year in 7933 of us started 21 of us graduated. We have our 45th reunion in January next year on the Gulf Coast, for those of us that did graduate. But we learned a lot in that year, we learned a lot about our capability and our capacity to adapt, and to continue to demonstrate to a lot of our instructors, that we were capable. And we were able to step up to the challenge. And as I mentioned, they weren't ready for us. They didn't have army boots to fit me at that time. They didn't have the proper equipment. For women in obstacle training, we had to improvise quite a lot, but their stories for other days. But it was an incredible year of where I learned how to how to be who I am in a male dominated environment. I still see it today where some people feel that they have to be who others expect them to be, rather than who they are. I am who I am, I am a woman, I am a feminine woman. I'm five foot one and a half. I don't try to be a male. And I learned that in that early stage of my career. And my first posting was down to Albury Wodonga, to the army unit down there. And my first commanding officer expected me to take minutes of meetings which I could do, he expected me to most wives of dignitaries who didn't respect the training that we just been through that was essentially to establish us, aligned with our male colleagues, equal pay for equal work had just been introduced. So it was quite an interesting time of learning for us women, but also for our our male superiors, our commanders, our leaders, and our colleagues. But the second thing I certainly learned early in my career were about the perceptions and the perceptions of a minority voice. And that they were often the views that we were there because we had to be we needed to fill a quota. We were there because they needed positive discrimination. It's a perception of favouritism. And breaking those perceptions, real or unconscious was quite a challenge because you really had to push through and have confidence in self have confidence that you were trained and having this capability. And I know that that impostor syndrome will kick in. But I remember the time in my career where I was invited or were told I was going to Papua New Guinea to be the first female to be the two Chief of Staff of our peace monitoring group in Bougainville. And I thought, No, I can't do that. I just wasn't up to it. I thought I'm not capable of taking on that mantle of being the first to do that job. And it was the encouragement of my superiors and my colleagues, say, Liz, you've been serving in the army for 20 years, you've got the capability, you wouldn't be where you are today, nor would you have been selected if you didn't have it. So just suck it up. And step out of that comfort

zone and just do it. And, you know, there were those in the group, others outside who did look at me and think, oh, that's just favouritism, or it's just, you know, they just want a female to do it. But I did it. And it was the best decision I ever took. And when I have reflected on that decision, that I look at it to think, well, it was the courage in my early childhood, their courage to stand up and say, No, I can do this. And I realized that I also brought something different, and differences good. And recognizing you are different. You're not the same as everyone else sitting on that board, or you're not the same as everyone else sits around the table in your leadership group. That difference is good. And what we recognize very early in that difference for me in Bougainville is that I was a woman. And it's a matriarchal society. And they are the landowners. They are the ones that influence and to them what was important was very different to what was important to the men. It was very different to what was important to the men we were negotiating with to hand back the weapons because what Bougainville had been 10 years in conflict. A generation had not been at school, they had destroyed everything that they had their whole infrastructure was gone. But for the women of Bougainville, what was important was Community Church education. And the greatest privilege I had was sitting with the women of Bougainville and opening their first school in 10 years to say they had found peace. And they were determined that they were going to keep peace, and the role that we as an Australian Army played in helping them find peace and finding their their direction, not telling them where they were going or telling them how to do it. But being being able to contribute to that was such a powerful lesson for me. And those lessons throughout my military career, of which there were many challenges and many mistakes and many rejections. And many times I was told that my career had come to a conclusion, just to realize actually, no, I was really in control of my own destiny a lot of the time, and learning from those many opportunities. But those times when people were critical, they doubted, they rejected to say, Well, look, I went on, and I did that. And I'm very proud and privileged to say I was the first female to be promoted to the rank of Major General in our Australian Army. And that was by taking those opportunities, but also selfishly building connections. And that's why I commend her for what she's doing. Because connections are so important. And community is so important to be able to turn to others when you just need that little bit of push to use your networks wisely. So after 31 and a half years, I left the army and went into my public service career. And so I met the lovely Katie and I went firstly to DVA to Department of Veterans Affairs, which was a soft landing for me. It was more of what I had been doing in my military service. But the most important lesson I learned there, someone wise said to me, don't let the uniform define you work out who you are. Because your uniform will go you won't be able to walk in a room with the rank on your shoulder. You won't walk into a room with a uniform to say this is who she is. You are in charge of your your identity. So who are you let's cross him. You're not Major General. What are those life's experiences that have created you? And what do you bring to a table? What do you bring to a conversation really important lesson that I then learned? Firstly, in my first appointment in the Department of Veterans Affairs, but then I wanted to learn more about this new profession of mine, which is the public service and I went to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. Wow. That was incredible experiences, the precursor to Home Affairs and we had in the two years I was there for Prime Ministers one twice. We had four ministers. We had the establishment of operations sovereign borders to stop the boats. We had offshore detention and all in two years, I learned very quickly, what it meant to be a public servant and how you work with government, how you work with different ministers, they're all different. Some are really good. You can read into that bad others, some prime ministers are really good. And I learned a lot from those two years. But I still needed to expand my horizons, I wanted to return to the Department of

Veterans Affairs, I just thought I knew I wanted to lead that department. My life's purpose, whether that was it, I have always been driven and determined. So after immigration, I went to Department Health, because I knew a lot of what Department of Veterans Affairs did was about health care. For veterans, you often don't hear about that you hear about compensation, potentially, and other tragedies in the veteran community. But healthcare is one of the big deliverables that Department of Veterans Affairs does. So learning about that in the Department of Health, learning about how we as a nation have, I still believe built one of the best universal health systems in the world. Yes, it needs some maintenance at the moment, and it needs some investment. But the foundation is there. And I learned a lot about that when I was in the Department of Health. And I learned about once again that profession of service. And thank you for saying that earlier, because when I get to my conclusion shortly, it is all about that service, donation and service to community. And when I went back to the Department of Veterans Affairs and had the great privilege of leading the department in my final years in the Australian public service, it was at a really challenging time. And once again, life events have helped shaped who I am. Not only was the department going through incredible scrutiny, public scrutiny through inquiries, and a Royal Commission, and media scrutiny. But also social media is incredibly damaging to individuals and to an environment but it can be extremely challenging to the leadership team. And drawing on your values. And that value set that you have will get you through because that has got me through so much. And that identity and who I am has got me through so much, because it was a pretty tough time. And then you add to that the pandemic and the challenges with making sure that you are looking after your people, but also looking after those who serve when sometimes you can become quite inward focused. And I learned so much through that. And I mean that once again, Hillier is another topic all of its own about leading through challenging times. But for me, it was learning about self all over again. Because it is challenging when people are criticizing you as a person. And you're hanging on to those values. And you know who you are. And that's important. That's what will get you through it. But the final part before I get to the conclusion is this final journey for me. The next stage of my life journey, and career journey, where I was asked after I left my full time employment, if I would join the board of RSL Lifecare limited. Everything about me was screaming, yes. But I then needed to think well hang on a sec. Do a bit of due diligence here. I've heard all about due diligence. What do I need to look at? Does the purpose does its values align with what's important to me? And is the organisation viable? Is the organisation where it needs to be? Do I agree with where it's heading, because at the heart of what it does, it is important to me aged care. Absolutely important. I learned so much about aged care in Department of Health, but also veterans and veteran services is at the heart of what it's all about. So doing all of that I thought, Yes, I want to do this. And what I then needed to do is ask myself, what can I bring? And why do I need to address because I know I bring capabilities. I know I've got professional credentials. I know I've got skills. I know I understand government, I know understand the customer perspective when we sit on that board, but I also know my limitations. And I also know that I haven't been on a not for profit board. I know I haven't had to worry about the bottom line. I've been funded by government. But I've had to worry about the bottom line in a different way. So what am I living and what do I need to do to do their second key area is about the resilience and I read, I've got boundless resilience, I don't through all my life, I've had to build that. And life events. And and I read a really fascinating article, and I'm sorry, I can't remember the author, but she's a fellow of the AICD. And it was in their recent company directors publication where she said, when you are in crisis and facing enormous amounts of public and private pressure, when things are happening quickly, and you have to make decisions during this time as summoning

your inner strength is important. And so it really resonated with me. And I thought, we all face that at some time, and how can I bring that to a board. The third key area I thought I could bring to the board was about leadership. But I also know my leadership needs to change, I'm not leading the organisation, and the chair of the board has been quite clear with me on this, you're not in charge, you're not getting into the operations, don't say, Well, I would have done it this way. So I know that my leadership has to adapt. I'm now a leader amongst leaders. And I now know that I have to be part of a different leadership team. I'm very excited about that. And the final strength I know I bring to the board are my values. And I know the difference between heart and head, I've had to use my heart, I've had to use my head. And I know when it's important to use one or the other, or find the balance between the both. And the values, I share the values of the organisation. So this is the exciting part of the next phase of my journey. So in wrapping up all of that earlier, and hopefully, given some food for thought, if I can just conclude by saying that, I know my formative years actually built my foundation. And I always thank my parents, and my faith for making sure I have the values and not being in a place where you have a clash of values. And I was in a place once where there was a clash of values, and I moved values at your heart and never let them go. And their their call to you and who you are. And I certainly including know that that resilience has got me through a lot of challenges, I have failed, I have made mistakes, I have faced adversity. After 44 years, you don't get to be where you are and what you achieved without that. Because the failures often define you as well. And don't be afraid of those. And I used to say that to staff that work with me Never be afraid of a mistake you've made. Never be afraid to own up to it. Never be afraid to come tell me about it. So that's a really important lesson because we are all human. And that's just the fabric of life and who we are. Someone said to me once, if you were to give one piece of advice to the young, you lose, what would it be? And I say what I would tell myself is to enjoy the journey. You know how sometimes during your journey you you get eaten up by something and think, Oh, I wish I'd done that differently. I wish I'd answered that differently. I wish I made this cornice or that call well enjoy the journey. You made it based on time and what you drew on to make that decision. Just enjoy your journey. Because it ends pretty quickly. When I was retiring a few months ago, oh, now what but look at me. I'm excited. And I'm going on to this board. And I've had my first board meeting. And I'm just excited about this next phase of my life. So thanks, Helga. Happy to take any questions.

Helga Svendsen 28:51

Oh, my God, Liz. Amazing. Thank you so much. People who come to these events regularly will know that I am pretty strict on time. And I've given you a bit of artistic license because I'm just like, there is no way I'm stopping you in this story. It is just too magnificent. So thank you so much. And Katie again. Thank you. So folks, I'm guessing that like me, your brains are buzzing with all of the incredible lessons that have been shared there. So what I'm going to do is pop you into a breakout room. We'll see you back here in seven or eight minutes and we'll do Q&A. Liz if you could not join the breakout room that comes up on your screen. If you could stay here that would be fantastic. Let's do some processing time of all those great lessons. We'll see you back here soon.

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