

11TH NOVEMBER 2024

CONVERSATIONS ON INNOVATION - E02

WGCDR KYLIE CIMEN

TRANSCRIPT OF EDGY AF'S INTERVIEW
WITH RAAF DIRECTOR OF
PREPAREDNESS INNOVATION

INTRODUCTION

Elsee:

"Welcome back to our conversations on innovation. Today we have a very special guest: Wing Commander Kylie Cimen. Thanks for joining us today, Kylie."

Kylie:

"It's a pleasure, Elsee. How are you?"

Elsee:

"I'm well, thanks, and yourself?"

Kylie:

"Good, good."

Elsee:

"So, Kylie, what is your role within the Edgy program?"

ROLE AND PREPAREDNESS

Kylie:

"So, I'm the Director of Preparedness Innovation, which is the agency or directorate that runs the Edgy program."

Elsee:

"So, break that down for us: preparedness and innovation. What does that mean to you?"

Kylie:

"It has a significant, I think, correlation in that we're all about—Air Force is all about, or Defence, in fact, is all about—preparedness and being prepared, preparedness being our business output. You would think that innovation needs to be aligned to that. So, when we're innovating, we should be doing things that align very strongly to our preparedness posture, right?"

Elsee:

"How does this sort of area aiming towards preparedness and innovation—what challenges are you facing with that within the Defence Force? Because it can be quite a rigid environment in some cases."

Kylie:

"Oh, definitely. I mean, I think, though, what the Edgy program offers is that flexibility and creativity that we require to enable our aviators to think outside the box and come up with solutions that really matter to them, and enable them to do their job more effectively, right?"

THE EDGY PROGRAM AND SUPPORT

Elsee:

"What do we have to help enable these aviators to think outside the box and be more innovative?"

Kylie:

"Well, the Edgy program has a number of aspects to it, and we have the Edgy labs across Australia—so there are 10 of those—and they're spaces where the aviators can go and rapidly prototype things. They don't need to do it alone either. I mean, we've got innovation coordinators that are part of the program, that can support the aviators in developing their proposals to support that rapid prototyping and development of ideas.

And then, alongside that, we've also got our training, our suite of training courses that are part of the program. Also, the training program offers aviators the skill sets that are required to actively problem-solve. So, our 'Ideate to Innovate' course, which is all about design thinking, provides the aviator with that skill set around how to solve problems, and that creativity and tools that they require to take that idea and make it a tangible outcome."

Elsee:

"So they get something tangible at the end of this, by the sound of it—not just soft skills, but it sounds like the aviators are creating something for themselves, for the Defence Force."

Kylie:

"That's the intent. I mean, I see that the program really is one of the Air Force's key cultural change programs. [...] looking at the Commander's intent or the Chief of Air Force intent, and it's all about being adaptable, and in that, we are developing the skill sets and the behaviours that are required from our warfighter. And then, in turn, would lead to us being a more adaptable force."

KYLIE'S BACKGROUND

Elsee:

"So, I'm really curious how you, Kylie, got into this role that you're in. What's your journey through the Defence Force like? How did you end up being the director of this program?"

Kylie:

"It's a really good question, Elsee. So, my background—I'm actually a Training Systems Officer, and I joined the Air Force, starting to indicate my age actually, so I started in 1989, probably before you were born. [laughs] So I started my journey in Air Force then. Then I worked very much in the command environment, looking at training needs analysis and things like that, looking after training in the operational sense as well. So, I was a key lead in introducing the C-130J training into service, so we got the new aircraft.

So, in 2003, I left Air Force to have my children and to raise my family. I came back into Air Force in 2012, and pretty much back to my old role, in fact. And then that led me to working up at Headquarters Air Command, where I was working with the Director of Preparedness, so really understanding how Air Force operates and what's needed to generate preparedness outcomes. And the role that I'm currently in was looking to be vacant, and I was keenly motivated to generate

that link between innovation and preparedness—I could see that there was a need to do that—so I put my hand up to take on a full-time contract.

So, I've gone from a full-time member to a part-time member, and then through my Reserve journey, I've actually upped my days, over time, to now I'm back as a full-time—pretty much a full-time—member, and grateful to that. I've actually just received a two-year extension on my contract, so I intend to be around for a while."

Elsee:

"I see, that's great."

Kylie:

"Which is good. So there's a lot of work to do in the program, so I think in two years' time we'll definitely be in a, hopefully in a better place than where we are."

PREPAREDNESS AND INNOVATION ALIGNMENT

Elsee:

"So, you took a nine-year break."

Kylie:

"I did."

Elsee:

"And hit the ground running—"

Kylie:

"I totally did, right?"

Elsee:

"So you're working under the Director Preparedness?"

Kylie:

"Correct."

Elsee:

"And then combine that with the preparedness, with the innovation role as well. Was there a Director of Innovation as well at the time?"

Kylie:

"No. So, at the time, the position was actually Air Command Innovation and Improvement, and it didn't belong under the DG, under the Director General Preparedness. The actual directorate stood up under DG Prep and had a name change to align it more closely to the preparedness outcomes for Defence."

Elsee:

"So, not only did you take over the preparedness role, you actually sort of brought together preparedness and innovation within the Air Force, by the sound of it."

Kylie:

"For Air Command."

Elsee:

"For Air Command, yes. Right, which is a big step to take."

Kylie:

"I don't think so. I think it's a logical step. I think that's what needed to happen. It's about aligning our innovation outcomes to what Air Force is all about, really, or Defence in terms of, making sure that we are prepared."

Elsee:

"Yes, and it sounds like innovation falls very in line with being more prepared in a modern environment."

Kylie:

"Absolutely. So, if we're looking at preparedness, it's all about that Plan, Do, Check, Act cycle of making sure that we know what our requirements are to achieve mission success. I'm doing missions and understanding, 'how prepared are we?'. And then that's where checking comes in and acting, which is like working out where our risk, deficiencies, issues, and gaps are—or GRIO, gaps, risk, issues, and opportunities really, more accurate. It's that through that process, innovation is one of the treatment options that can then make us more prepared or actually address those risks that come out of our preparedness management system."

Elsee:

"Right, that's a really good way to phrase how to be prepared for the future."

Kylie:

"Absolutely."

THE GOAL AND PEOPLE-CENTRIC APPROACH

Elsee:

"And so, the goal of that—what's the target? What's the best way to achieve, make us use innovation to make us more prepared?"

Kylie:

"So, innovation can't happen without people, Elsee, and I think what it does is it really shines a light on our capability, our prime capability being our people, and putting the aviator as the central part of success in our preparedness equation. I think that's what it does."

Elsee:

"Great. Which aviators are we actually trying to target within the Edgy program?"

Kylie:

"Oh, I mean, I think everybody has an ability or has a problem that needs to be solved at some point in their career, and the Edgy program is for everybody. And I think what the risk that we have with talking about 'aviators' and 'airmen,' as they were in the past, is that straight away, we tend to go to the other ranks or to the non-commissioned, but aviators are all people in Air Force that are in uniform, and even beyond that, they are also our APS and other people as well that work to generate the effects that are required. So, it's all people in Air Force the Edgy program is for, because as I said, we all have a problem at some point in our career, and Edgy has no barriers. Like, whoever needs to have something solved, we're here to support them."

Elsee:

"We're problem-solving in new and innovative ways."

Kylie:

"Absolutely, and it's for everybody. I mean, as I say, we don't know—we don't want to exclude anyone from this, and we're all striving to ensure that Air Force can put its best foot forward at the end of the day."

INNOVATION TODAY AND STRATEGIC RELEVANCE

Elsee:

"So what's Edgy doing differently? How is it changing innovation within the Defence Force and especially Air Force, compared to in the past? There's always been innovation—what's Edgy doing differently?"

Kylie:

"I think what's really making Edgy stand out is that we are really consciously linking our innovations to our strategic and operational requirement. I think that's really key. Like, we're doing things that are relevant, and we are advocating on the part of the aviator as well. So, I think the key elements of making sure that the aviators are being heard—I think that's key, because we want our people to be engaged and part of the solution. But beyond that, we're also taking a strategic view as well, in that whatever our aviators are exposing in terms of their requirements and problems that they're facing, we're ensuring that there's relevance to that, and that we're linking these deficiencies to a strategic requirement."

Elsee:

"So it sounds like we're really sort of trying to target the issues from a bottom-up perspective, listening to the individual aviators rather than looking from a top-down perspective at the global issues within Air Force, but actually looking at the smaller issues and building up from there. And is there—do we have things in place to help support them? I hear about this innovation pipeline directed towards the aviators. Is that helping them with their issues, or is that more to provide them with a way to make a solution of their own?"

Kylie:

"Definitely both. So, we have a very cogent framework that enables us to assess proposals that come through. So, when an aviator has an idea, we can have a look through the lens of whether or not there's relevance and how quickly we can get that idea into a capability that can be realized by our aviators across the board. So, it's through these frameworks that we can then generate capability fast and get things into the hands of users quickly. And I think that's a core aspect of our program, improving that it's successful and will actually do something to support the people out there in the field, and at the coalface."

Elsee:

"Cause we [want to] have something to show—"

Kylie:

"Absolutely. It's not just a thing—it's actually making a difference. And I think when people see that it's making a difference, you start to get a lot of trust from the workforce out there, and people [want to] engage more."

Elsee:

"Absolutely."

DEFINING CAPABILITIES AND SPONSORSHIP

Elsee:

"Tell me more about these 'capabilities,' as you phrase it. What does that entail? What's included under a capability for—"

Kylie:

"Well, I think a capability is anything that enables you to do something. So, talk about a capability being at an end state, or something that people can use—like, a user can use it to generate, or support generating, an effect that Air Force is trying to achieve. So, when I talk about capabilities, I'm talking about any sort of tangible outcome that comes from the program that enables that to happen."

Elsee:

"So, tangible things that the aviators are creating, or the program in general is creating."

Kylie:

"Correct."

Elsee:

"What are some of the challenges you're facing around this, trying to generate these capabilities, especially with such a broad program that Edgy is?"

Kylie:

"Look, that's an interesting question. Our biggest challenge, really, is engaging with sponsors that can then champion these ideas that aviators have. So, that's probably our main challenge: once we

have an idea or a problem set that needs to be solved, we really need to identify a sponsor who has enough influence and money to actually support the development of a solution, and also to advocate on behalf of that solution so that it becomes a tangible outcome in the long run. That's our biggest challenge."

Elsee:

"So we're looking for third-party sponsors external to Defence, or within Defence?"

Kylie:

"Predominantly internal to Defence."

Elsee:

"That's what I was thinking, because if it's external, do they have their name tied to it as well? But internal to Defence means it's [Defence-owned]"

Kylie:

"Exactly. Some within—generally a senior leader or someone like that who can vouch that this is something that we need to get after and that it matters to their unit or to their business element or force element, something that they need solved, right?"

Elsee:

"So would the sponsor then take responsibility or ownership of this new capability? How closely would they continue to work with the aviator who's come up with this capability?"

Kylie:

"They would be involved to some extent. I mean, they will be the ones that would make the decision on whether or not they agree that [...] the problem is a problem that they want solved, and that [...] the solution that is developed solves the problem. So they'll be the ones that would make those decisions."

Elsee:

"And is this sort of part of the big goal for Edgy in the future, producing more of these capabilities, finding sponsors, being more prepared?"

Kylie:

"Definitely. That's what we [want to] continue doing for the next couple of years."

Elsee:

"Yep, definitely. [Because] you've still got at least two years here."

Kylie:

"I do. I've got two years up until January 27[...] we've noticed that the success of the program is really dependent upon sponsors and working with our aviators to generate these capabilities. Where we don't have a sponsor, it's unlikely that these capabilities get introduced into service. So, we've recognised that very early on in the process, and we talked about the pipeline right at the beginning. We need to ensure that we've identified the sponsor and that that sponsor agrees to be part of the solution, right?"

Elsee:

"So, what's the best way to engage more sponsors then?"

Kylie:

"Well, I think as people become more aware of the program and understand that we are all about doing good things, that becomes easier. But finding sponsors is really, probably, my biggest responsibility, right? That's pretty much up to me."

Elsee:

"Okay. So if we can produce some tangible evidence that there are capabilities that have gone through the pipeline and come out, that could [...] help sponsors actually see the vision and see your vision—what the Edgy program is trying to produce."

Kylie:

"Oh, definitely. And, I mean, this also comes through the senior leaders, such as the Chief of Air Force and the Air Commander Australia, who are vouching for and supporting, promoting the program as a necessary element to achieving that competitive edge and, developing a warfighter mindset. That type of advocacy, if you like, of the program—that's what's really needed to then generate the sponsorship and the support that's required to get these capabilities and these proposals into becoming a reality."

Elsee:

"And you say this cutting edge—yes—how does Edgy help us give us the cutting edge against, I'm not [going to] say, enemies or allies, but other Defence forces around the world?"

Kylie:

"Yes. So the way I see it, Elsee, is that, if we're looking at an innovative organisation, which is what we're trying to achieve here, innovation is a direct correlation to being adaptable. And I look at it through the lens of Darwin —like, the most adaptable species in an environment is the one that will survive — if you don't adapt quick, you're a sitting duck, you're unlikely to survive. So, in terms of the context of being in a military organisation, we [want to] be quick adapters, we [want to] be the ones that survive. So if we are adapting fast, and if we can adapt faster than our adversaries, then we've got the edge. We're in front of that loop of threat, and we're most likely to succeed. So that's how I see that translation."

MAINTAINING A COMPETITIVE EDGE

Kylie:

"Keeping that competitive edge, correct, especially with technology, which I think is something Australia has always had.

I know for a small nation, we pack a punch when it comes to that. And I think, through the Edgy program, we can actually live that. We're quick adopters; we can quickly adopt technology. We can create that mindset as well. It's not just about the technology; it's about the behaviour and the mindset that's needed to provide us with that competitive edge and to keep us adaptable. Which I think is really, really critical."

Elsee:

"Keep on sort of moving forward rather than stepping back and relying on what we know."

Kylie:

"Exactly. We're stepping into the unknown, really, to look at these new ideas and capabilities. Definitely, —something that our adversaries probably haven't considered. [...] You [want to] be able to be thinking ahead of the curve."

Elsee:

"Do you think we are staying ahead of the curve?"

Kylie:

"Well, I think so. Well, who knows—we're not, thankfully, we're not in an environment where we have to be thinking about whether or not we are, but I like to think that we are developing a workforce that will be able to. And I think that's great. That's the point that this program is all about. It's about whether we can or will be able to, if the time ever came. And I think this program is really what it's all about—it's about providing Air Force with the mindsets, or the warfighting mindset, that adaptability that's required if we ever do require it."

Elsee:

"Which is critical, which is, I think, echoing the Chief of Air Force's intent of[..]stepping forward, especially into—how's it phrased? A 'strategic autumn, I believe?"

Kylie:

"Exactly. So he's talking about it as being the strategic autumn, and, he talks about people being our biggest capability, and they are. And though, to add on to that, they are our biggest capability, and we need to invest in them—not just in their technical skills, but in the way that they think. And I think Edgy really is that investment in providing that thought process around being adaptable."

Elsee:

"And so it sounds like we're trying to not just teach them new things, but teach them new ways of thinking."

CONCLUSION

Kylie:

"I think so, that's right. I think this is what this does. This is, I think, Air Force's most critical cultural change program: it's teaching the people, the aviators, to think differently."

Elsee:

"Definitely, be adaptable, creative problem-solvers. Thank you so much for joining us today, Kylie. It's been fantastic."

Kylie:

"My pleasure, Elsee."

Elsee:

"That's today's conversation on innovation. My name's Elsee, from here at the Creative Element, talking with Wing Commander Kylie Cimen. Thank you so much.