



ROYAL AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE

Podcast Transcript

Conversations on The Runway – Women in Leadership in Defence – Episode 2

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Guest: CMDR Phillipa Hay, Commanding Officer, HMAS Moreton

Michael Veitch:

Picture yourself, if you will, for a moment at sea on the bridge of a large modern warship. It's nighttime, things are quiet. The officer of the watch is there, as is the helmsmen. There's a steady comforting hum to the ship as you cut through the calm black ocean far from home, a faint glow from a radar screen is just about the only light there is to see by. There is time to think. You look out through the window and into the night, you can't see much, but you know that somewhere out there, there are other warships sailing with you and you are part of a large and important fleet engaged in a large and important military exercise. Get the picture? Life in the Navy. But let's say that you're not just a sailor or even one of those ship's regular officers. Let's say that you're the commander of this ship, accountable for the lives of every person on board.

Michael Veitch:

What does that kind of responsibility feel like? Do you doubt yourself? Do you feel completely confident that every decision you make is the right one? Well, let's up the ante a bit more. Let's say you're not just in charge of this ship, but every one of those other ships out there in the fleet as well, because you are leading this exercise, you are in charge in overall strategic command of every ship, some from up to a dozen different nationalities, and thus indirectly every person, and that's thousands, on board those vessels as well. Well, I can tell you that level of responsibility does my head in and we're not finished yet.

Michael Veitch:

Well, this is no make-believe scenario for the officer we're going to get to know just a little off today is one of the most admired and respected officers in our Royal Australian Navy. My name is Michael Veitch and I am truly honoured to have as my guest today on Conversations on the Runway, Commander Phillipa Hay.

Commander Phillipa Hay:

Good morning, Michael. Thank you for that introduction. I sat here whimsically thinking of myself back at sea.

Michael Veitch:

Oh good. I am so glad. You told me recently in one of our pre-chats for this, that an early ambition was to be an admiral in the Royal Australian Navy. How many female admirals are in the Royal Australian Navy today?

Commander Philippa Hay:

We do have female admirals in our Royal Australian Navy, which is fantastic. They are high-performers and working in the areas of health and logistics and the Navy ship building program.

Michael Veitch:

You're on your way then, which is great. Let's go back a bit. You're from a seafaring family and what better place Philippa had to begin life at sea than on the very finish line of the Sydney to Hobart yacht race.

Commander Philippa Hay:

I was very privileged. My parents had a beautiful house down in Hobart on Battery Point, Secheron Point actually is the piece of land that juts out just around the corner from Salamanca, for those who are familiar with Hobart, and my bedroom window looked straight out across the Sydney Hobart finish line. And I would spend my childhood laying there all day and all night with my curtains open, watching the ships coming in in the wee hours of the morning, hearing them cheer as they crossed the finish line. And it was most enjoyable.

Michael Veitch:

I know that part of Tasmania, I've lived there and I adore it. And I actually can't think of a place more imbued, not simply with the romance, but the passion and even the terror of the sea. Is that what you felt about the sea as a youngster?

Commander Philippa Hay:

I'm very respectful of the ocean. I've only been frightened at sea once or twice. I suppose I've always been very fortunate to have a good captain in command during those instances, one of the captains being my father, when we spend a lot of time at sea in his 42 foot yacht. And that was off the east coast of Africa. And the other time was actually off the west coast of Australia, just off Exmouth there when a cyclone was coming down and we were shipping a lot of water over the bridge and it was most unpleasant, but respectful of the ocean.

Michael Veitch:

Is this the trip that you sailed around the world at the age of 10, Philippa?

Commander Philippa Hay:

Yes, yes I did. So the family, we packed up and off we set, it was my mum and dad, one of my older sisters, and myself and dad managed to find what I thought was a very old man. I think he probably was 22 at the time, fellow from the UK called Lionel, who I was most

unkind to when I discovered that he'd never actually sailed a yacht. He'd only ever sailed hobie cats on a lake and for a child of the very professional age of 10 who had spent entire life in the water, I thought it was appalling that he thought he was going to be able to sail a yacht all the way to London. So, the poor fellow, I didn't give him a lot of slack.

Michael Veitch:

So tell me about the storm.

Commander Philippa Hay:

We were between Mauritius and Durban. Oh, probably about four days out from Durban. And the previous day I kid you not, we had hit a whale.

Michael Veitch:

Good heavens.

Commander Philippa Hay:

And it was a fascinating buildup. It was going into the evening, that day, my father and I had been pouring over the charts and he'd been showing me the bottom topography. And we'd been looking at all the seamounts, which I found fascinating. And as the sun was just setting in and on the main oceans of the world, when you're operating in the equatorial regions, they always talk of the doldrums and the breezes come up and down with the temperature of the day. And so as the sun sets and you go into dusk or dawn, the winds tend to die off. And as the air temperature and the sea temperature equalise, and then the winds will pick up again after sunset.

So we're in that really light winds, almost still, the sea is glassy. And we were just reducing speed and we're going to have to change the sails for the night. And we came to this almighty thud and the whole yacht shuttered and my immediate thought was, "Good grief, we've hit a seamount," and within seconds it became quite apparent, we'd actually collided with a sperm whale that was just sleeping just below the surface.

Michael Veitch:

Oh, good heavens.

Commander Philippa Hay:

And it's forehead nudge the port bow just under the water line, timber haul yacht. And this whale came up beside us groaning. I never forget the noise of a whale groaning. Incredible, incredible. I'd never saw that on a David Attenborough. And we're all peering over the side, going oh, the poor whale. My father, of course, much more astute was going, crikey. I hope it doesn't flick it's tail cause we'll turn into matchsticks. And then of course we had to scarper up for removal of the sails that rocked forward in the hold.

And dad did the repairs at sea, which were just amazing. I, being the smallest, was relegated to the bilge pump and was down there for hours and had the pump to the point where after the repairs, my mother went looking for me and said, "Where's Philippa?" And there I was dutifully still on the bilge pump after about six hours down there working the bilge. So we'd

affected the repairs, the following day, as we got closer to the coast and the weather and moving further south, the weather patterns changed and we moved into the convergent signs where you get the really great tropical storms. And that was a horrendous storm, huge seas. The yacht's mast has horizontal bars called spreaders to give the mast more stability.

The spreaders were in the water, we were being thrown around, and there was a water spout, which was frightening and fascinating. And dad had sent me below because I was so light that he didn't want me washed over the side. And I kid you not, I went through my drills of what would happen if we went down and I was preparing for the life raft and I got a sail bag and started packing non-perishable foods. And I can remember making a conscious decision not to pack the Weet-Bix because I knew it was going to be useless in the life raft.

Michael Veitch:

They'd get soggy.

Commander Philippa Hay:

Because they would get soggy.

Michael Veitch:

And who likes soggy Weet-Bix?

Commander Philippa Hay:

No. So my mother came down and saw me in the saloon, packing all these things. She said, "What earth are you doing?" I said, "I'm just getting ready in case we have to get into the life raft." And I don't know whether she thought that was horrifying or amusing, but it was pretty scary. I'm not sure how long it went, for about six to eight hours.

Michael Veitch:

Just remind us how old you were, Philippa?

Commander Philippa Hay:

I was 10. In fact, I was not yet 10 because I didn't turn 10 until we reached the Azores, so I was still nine.

Michael Veitch:

I didn't turn 10 until I reach the Azores. Now that is a wonderful thing for anyone to be able to say. What a fabulous experience to have. Was your father, just remind me, was he a competing yachtsman? Did he actually compete in the Sydney to Hobarts that went past your bedroom window?

Commander Philippa Hay:

So dad grew up on the water. His father was a merchant mariner as well. So he grew up selling dinghies, as did my sisters and I, and there's a dinghy competition called the Stonehaven Cup, which is about 150 years old now, the Stonehaven Cup. And he grew up sailing all classes of yachts. Hasn't done a Sydney to Hobart, but he's done many Melbourne

to Hobart, many Sydney to Fiji, Sydney to [inaudible 00:10:54], lots of sailing all around Australia. When I was growing up, my friends would have a shack up on the east coast of Tasmania up in Bicheno or Swansea. The Hay family-

Michael Veitch:

Oh, the Tasmanian shack tradition. I do know it well. We have to explain to people who are not Tasmanians, that the concept of a shack is something very, very special. Isn't it? It's something that you don't quite own, but you don't not own, but it's yours for perpetuity sometimes in often wonderful and exotic locations.

Commander Philippa Hay:

Oh yes. And they're pretty rough. They're not holiday houses.

Michael Veitch:

They're shacks.

Commander Philippa Hay:

I stayed at friend's shacks... They're shacks, and they had a tin that was the toilet. And then at the end of your five days, you had to go and dig deep hole and empty it out. And heaven forbid you drew the short straw and that was your duty, but yes, but my friends would go to the shack and the Hay family, we'd go sailing somewhere.

Michael Veitch:

One of how many kids in the family, Philippa?

Commander Philippa Hay:

I'm the youngest of three girls.

Michael Veitch:

Number three girls. And were all the girls on this extraordinary trip that you did when you were not 10 years old but in fact nine?

Commander Philippa Hay:

So my middle sister who she had just finished year 12, she was there and my big sister had just got married and she was heading off to start her married life up in Melbourne with her husband, my brother-in-law.

Michael Veitch:

Okay. What about the Naval tradition, if there is one in your family, Philippa?

Commander Philippa Hay:

So, certainly a military tradition, on both sides of the family, the grandparents served during the world wars. And one of my great uncles on mom's side was a chief in the Corvettes up in

the Pacific region, so Southwest Pacific, around New Guinea. And I haven't really been able to find a lot of information on him. It's been a bit challenging, but certainly my dad was of the age where he was in Nasho and he's the youngest of five and he had all sisters who didn't serve. One of them though, married a Polish officer who served with the Allies. But certainly from my parents, you're a no direct military service there. My big sister spent time in the Army Reserves, firstly, as a soldier, which she did not enjoy because she's too bossy and quickly realised that she probably should be an officer. And then she ended up actually becoming a doctor in the Army. And my middle sister served over in the UK and did reserve Army service over there as a nurse. So there's always been that thread of the desire to serve, which I think definitely stems from my parents.

Michael Veitch:

Tell us a little about your mother. What did she make of these three extraordinary girls, for having three girls, well, I don't know if a parent would regard that as good luck or bad luck, I'm sure good luck in your case, but what did she make of having three girls that all wanted to do unconventional jobs?

Commander Philippa Hay:

We were brought up as mom's daughters and dad's sons, and anything that dad needed done, we were called upon to do. Dad was never of the opinion that there were stereotypes. With sailing, we were nearly always the only girls down there doing sailing and cadet dinghies. And when dad needed a crew to sail on his pennants, we were the crew and we were all taught how to use all the tools. And then at the end of the day, we'd be able to go home and we'd put on our finery and dress up as beautiful ladies and off we'd go. A blessing and a curse having daughters, the blessing being we'll do it all, the curse being we'll raid mum's wardrobe.

Michael Veitch:

When did the notion of you being a Naval career start to cement itself in your thinking Philippa?

Commander Philippa Hay:

I'm not sure Michael, that I ever wasn't going to join the Navy. It would have been probably in high school where I realised that I always knew I wanted to be on the water and associated with the water. And in high school, I was trying to think, how do I make that happen? I was very adventurous. I liked being outdoors. I like being able to work in a dynamic environment. I love to be able to be challenged and each day being slightly different. So the Navy seemed to tick all of those boxes for me. The advent of the Defence Academy certainly was great. Great glossy brochure of a military college that had only just been established in 86. And that offered studies and military training as a pathway to get to sea. I did initially go into recruiting to do undergraduate medicine and be a doctor in the Navy and was shone about ADFA.

Commander Philippa Hay:

And I went, oh, wow. That seems right up my alley. And I'm very glad I did ADFA because I look at my amazing girlfriends who went off and did medicine. And there is absolutely no way I could've committed to those years of study. And the short time that I spent visiting them at UTAS when they were doing their undergrad medicine, I spent most of it sitting under some beautiful trees in the sunshine thinking I'm not cut out to study at a civilian university. I need the military college to keep me on track.

Michael Veitch:

I was going to ask, was there someone in your life, a mentor, a family member, a teacher, who told you and made you believe that if you put your mind to it, you could achieve anything, but it sounds like your whole family was so supportive of anything that you would have decided you wanted to do.

Commander Philippa Hay:

Absolutely. My family are well and truly supportive. We're a very tight family. A family secret means everyone in the family knows it. And we all drive each other along, hold each other's hands during our successes and our failures. I went to a sensational school in Hobart, the Fahan School, a girl's school down in lower Sandy Bay and the staff and teachers down there were just magnificent. There were no boundaries or limitations placed upon you with regards to what you could achieve. It was all about being your best self, not complying to a particular standard or having to achieve this particular benchmark. It was all about being the best you that you could possibly be, be that in the sporting arena, in the artistic arena, in the academic arena, and that's truly what Fahan was really focused about and remains focus.

Michael Veitch:

Wonderful. And I think also adding to that, those places that can make you realise strengths in you that you didn't initially realise you have. I think that's the real secret, isn't it?

Commander Philippa Hay:

Yes. Mum used to send my sisters and I, because we're so spaced out in age, we always went individually on department of sport and rec holiday camps, they were called. Well, I used to think they were just the pits and we'd be sent out to a camp with all these kids that we didn't know, you'd join the bus at 7:00 AM and then be shipped out. The food was always rubbish. The accommodation was always freezing.

Michael Veitch:

You're really selling it, Philippa. I can just see that somewhere [inaudible 00:18:59]. And what's it called again?

Commander Philippa Hay:

I don't think they run them anymore. Maybe they did [inaudible 00:19:05], but the skills that, that taught me was on that one hour bus trip from Hobart out to wherever the camp was being conducted, I had to find three other girls to share a cabin with or a tent partner or something like that and everyone went with friends. So I'd have to be trying to break into

groups and on the camps, we'd be doing, doing caving and rock climbing and spotlight and clamouring through the bush and I know one of my sisters, when she went, she never cleaned her teeth for the entire week or changed her clothes, much to my mother's horror. But I think I was a bit more hygienic than her, but it made us realise that we had to be confident in ourselves and comfortable with our self and always comfortable reaching out to other people to form bonds really quickly. And it's a skill you don't realise that you're attaining until later in life, you'd look back and reflect and go, oh, yes, that made me who I am.

Michael Veitch:

A good judge of character and a good judge of people must be an absolutely essential part of your job. Would you agree with that, Philippa?

Commander Philippa Hay:

Yes. I suppose in the defence force, and of course in the Navy, we all come through a recruiting process. They're looking for particular people. We have particular traits that they're looking for. Those who are quite resilient, those people who are confident in themselves, people who are willing to serve and serve in an environment of which we don't always have control over. And so by the time you actually get through that recruiting process and then join your particular service, and the services do recruit different types of people, because we are looking for different characters and personalities to fit our various environments. You pop out the other end with a community of who are of similar mindset and willing to work together as a team so that we can achieve our particular missions.

Michael Veitch:

Is the geography of the Navy indicative of that, Philippa? Are you looking for people or do you think people who are able to simply get on with other people in a close environment, such as a ship, is that an essential part of being a successful Naval personnel?

Commander Philippa Hay:

So an affinity with the ocean, I would have always thought that, that would be a natural thrall, but of course, I've got countless friends in the Navy who come from Wagga or Orange or the back of Ballarat and places where there... And some of them had never even seen the ocean before they joined the Navy.

Michael Veitch:

Good heavens.

Commander Philippa Hay:

And I'm often quietly amused at the people who joined the Navy, who can't swim.

Michael Veitch:

That's not true, surely.

Commander Philippa Hay:

Michael, that is so true. And I think, wow, you must have great confidence in our survivability if you think you won't ever have to swim. It is a skill to live in close confines with people. And on a ship you're never alone. We are very intimate in our knowledge of one another at sea. And our relationships are very strong. Ships company is a very tight community, and we're very respectful of each other's personal space. Your bunk is the only thing that truly is yours. And even we're very mindful of you don't even go and place your toiletry bag on someone else's bunk, even for a split second, because that little 1.8 metres by 80 centimetres, that is their only space.

Commander Philippa Hay:

And it's really important to respect that and you get to learn people's triggers and when they're amicable to a joke and a knock around and when they're not interested. I know that I'm best most times of day, but if I get a call about an hour after I've gone to bed, no matter what time of night that is, I'm probably not going to be overly pleasant. I know that in myself, I've had others also to give me that feedback. So you get to know yourself pretty well.

Michael Veitch:

Was the Navy what you expected when you joined as a young woman, Philippa?

Commander Philippa Hay:

Yes. Absolutely. But remember, I love being on the water. I love the adventure. I love the ships, be it patrol bows, or one of our frigates, or one of our helicopter docking ships. I love the big machinery. I love the fact that everybody has a role to play, and we're like an organism. And each individual on board has a role from the captain right down to the most junior sailor on board. And the way we have designed our ships these days, gone are the large crew numbers. We now have a crew number because we've automated a lot of systems and we have a crew that is just right to make the ship run.

Commander Philippa Hay:

But what that means is if we're missing someone, we really feel their absence, no matter what rank or rate. So it's really important that everyone knows their job, and we rely on each other and trust one another to be able to perform those roles. And I love that. I came to a point a year or so ago of realising that I must be a guinea pig. Guinea pigs like to live in colonies. I'm not a loner, I'll never be the lone wolf. I much prefer to be part of the team and have my role to play and know that what I'm doing is contributing to the success of the ship, the unit, even all the taskforce.

Michael Veitch:

Well, more than contributing to it, Philippa as a commander, I'm actually reminded of what another former Tasmanian resident, general Montgomery, I think he lived in Launceston when he was a child, because his father was a priest there. He did say an interesting thing, which I read once, that the secret to being a good general is making sure that everybody under your command knows exactly what they have to do and they're confident in their role. What do you think of that?

Commander Philippa Hay:

I wholeheartedly agree with that. And I would add into that, they need to understand the value that their contribution brings.

Michael Veitch:

Because as you're no doubt aware, as a senior leader, you can't control everything. And I've always thought it's probably a little ironic, but I suspect that the further up the chain you advance, the more you find that there is in fact that you cannot actually control. So learning to trust those under your command and make sure that they are confident and happy in their role must be such a large part of your job.

Commander Philippa Hay:

Very much so. I'm very focused when I'm imparting the intent is a lot of people know how we need to achieve something, but I always want to make sure they understand the why, particularly when you start bringing together individual ships, so they've got autonomy of command or their ship, but they need to know and understand the why the contribution of their ship is important. But also, the interplay between the different capabilities, be it ships, submarines, helicopters, aircraft, and how it all comes together. I find if they understand the why, then they can keep looking upward and outward rather than focusing down and to what's just important for their ship or their aircraft, and can understand that they themselves are part of the bigger jigsaw piece. And then there's a micro jigsaw piece, which is their ship. And then their ship is a piece inside another jigsaw. And if they understand the why, I tend to find to get a better outcome.

Michael Veitch:

That's so important because we're not, in today's society, are we Philippa, in that age where young people in any job are simply told, just do as you're told, and don't ask questions, you just can't. Young people are not like that. And you actually can't get away with it anyway, even in other professions, like chiefs are no longer allowed to shout at their underlings, which annoys some old school chiefs, but I'm sure it leads to a much happier workplace, but you have to be able to change as a commander to adapt to the various types of people coming through, don't you?

Commander Philippa Hay:

So Michael, the sailors and officers that we have coming through into the defence force today are very different to the sailors and junior officers who joined when I did nearly 30 years ago. When I joined, sailors only required year 10, they were coming in a lot just to get

a trade. The sailors who are joining now come in with year 12, with bachelors, with masters, they're no longer just school leavers. Often they're mature age, 25, 35, 45, and looking for something different to do in their life, a totally different individual, a smart, savvy individual who has got a lot to offer.

Commander Philippa Hay:

So to waste that person's capability whilst we still in the military, we have a rank structure and we have a requirement for everyone to be disciplined and know their role and their place in that rank structure, because there may well come a time when the commander needs to say "Jump," and they say, "How high?" And they say, "Do it right now," that there is 100% a role for that. But as we develop our capability and prepare ourselves in a peacetime environment, it would be foolish for us not to capitalise on the richness that these individuals who are now joining our service bring to us. And I think as we have a change out of those who joined 30 years ago, and I'm maybe sitting in that dinosaur carrot category.

Michael Veitch:

Don't think so.

Commander Philippa Hay:

We forget that the junior sailors aren't the junior sailors that they joined with, these very different type of individual that we're bringing to service. They're smart, they're savvy, they're technically savvy and they want to contribute, not just do.

Michael Veitch:

And yet still a lot of those old standards remain because, and this is what would scare the devil out of me, Philippa, you know that when the time comes and God willing, it will not, but if it does, that your job is to place both yourselves and the lives of many of those wonderful young people that you've worked and trained with directly in harm's way.

Commander Philippa Hay:

Michael, every time a ship sails, it's real. We don't go to sea and pretend every time we let go lines and proceed, the safety of the ship is the command responsibility and those onboard. Every time we launch and recover a sea boat, launch recover a helicopter, every time we're operating in company with other ships, firing our weapons. We do all of that in the peacetime environment and the hazards that our people are being exposed to are real every single time. Every time our ships are at sea, they are operationally fitted and ready to go and can pivot on a dime to move straight out of an exercise scenario into real time activities, be that conducting a rescue off the west coast of an Indonesian fishing boat in howling conditions, as Anzac recently did on her returned from a deployment, to having to come back into harbour and grab some additional stores to proceed up and do some disaster relief in the region, or be able to respond to support a border protection threat.

At all times, our patrol boats and our ships are ready for operation activity, regardless of the initial reason of why we left port, which may well have been to go and exercise and do drills. Life at sea every day is real life. We always have a risk of fire flood and toxic hazards, which

we drill. And occasionally they happen at sea and we need to respond. So for us, the only bit of upping the ante is if we have to move into a period of conflict, God willing that doesn't happen. But, from every sailor and officer who's at sea is doing it live every single time.

Michael Veitch:

You've had some extraordinarily dramatic sounding deployments peacekeeping in Bougainville, East Timor in particular. Tell us about what your experience of East Timor were.

Commander Philippa Hay:

I was up in East Timor, right at the beginning of Interfet, we were returning from deployment from up in Southeast Asia, where we've been conducting various activities with Southeast Asian partners. And I was an officer of the watch in the HMS Adelaide and we got redirected to support the emerging Interfet at East Timor, which was maintaining a maritime exclusion zone to the north of Dili so that forces could flow in and the Timorese were protected. It's a fascinating time. There was a lot of uncertainty. And we were unsure of how the Indonesians were going to respond to our presence as all the maritime forces flowed in there. But it's a classic case of when you walk on the bridge and everything is just the same, but suddenly it feels a little more real. And whilst there was limited intelligence to suggest that there was going to be any kinetic action, we didn't expect anyone to fire upon us, notwithstanding, there was still a high level of uncertainty of what the response would be to our presence there and how we were going to manage that.

Michael Veitch:

Was that the first time that you felt on deployment, that this is a situation that could easily spin out of control, something beyond training, something beyond what is tried to be replicated in exercises. Did this feel like... There's a famous old quote by an old German general, I think, "No battle plan ever survives the first shot fired by the enemy." Does that thought go through your head when you're on deployment to such an unstable situation and such a dramatically, a human situation such as Bougainville in East Timor?

Commander Philippa Hay:

I think we're certainly well prepared to be able to, I'd like to think, survive the first shot. When you're bringing together the international forces, that's always an additional challenge, but we do spend a lot of our time operating with our regional partners and our allies, so that when we do come together in an unaltered circumstance, that we can look each other in the eye and have an understanding of how they're going to react and respond, how we're going to interact with one another and support one another, what some of their capabilities and their limitations will be and how we can complement or support one another. So I don't think there's any sense of nervousness. It's more that sharpening the sword and going we have got all the tools here at our disposal, let's now really start to refine them. And certainly there's a lot of additional planning that goes in and it's an iterative process.

Commander Philippa Hay:

And to make sure that we're best prepared and best postured. Bougainville was fascinating because it was a bit hard to pick who the bad guys were there. And there was a lot of confusion ashore and our main mission up there was to support the locals around Na Arro Ar and Lolaho and return some sense of normality in there. There were a few skirmishes on the hills around us and nothing at sea thankfully. Although I did find myself ashore in an ambulance with a skirmish happening around me and thinking and responding in a very Naval officer way and laughing, thinking, "For heaven's sake. If I get shot, my mother is going to be furious and ask why on earth I'm ashore."

Michael Veitch:

Sorry, I think you're underplaying this. So you're in an ambulance essentially in the middle of a firefight?

Commander Philippa Hay:

No, it was an ambush and we never really worked out who it was, whether they were ambushing us or other vehicles around, but I can remember the sounds of the jungle, not being able to see out, because can't in an ambulance, and just thinking, "Okay, so I'm actually here on my own assistance to my captain, that I wanted to go ashore and do a patrol with the health team. And if I get injured or shot, my mother is going to be so crossed."

Michael Veitch:

I'm assuming that you've had to say to people under your command, "Remember your training, go back to your training." Do you ever have to tell yourself that in those sorts of situations?

Commander Philippa Hay:

I do and fascinating, I was having this discussion the other day about drills with couple of my sailors. And we're talking about stress and resilience and the way in the military, we deal with this, as do people who play elite sport, you do the drill and we drill over and over and over, so that in times of stress, you've got all that muscle memory and you just default to the drill and you don't have to think, "What do I do now?" It all just comes naturally. Drills aren't there just to annoy you. I believe they're there to keep us safe. And so that we don't crumble and you don't have to think. So yes, you remind me. I had no drill, though, of how to protect myself ashore. That was well outside my lane. So hence, I defaulted to my standard position of when I'm under threat and laughed, which is preferable to screaming.

Michael Veitch:

Well, no training can account to that. Perhaps it should, perhaps a unit in training should be laughing under fire presented by Commander Philippa Hay. I think you've made history. You also made history, Philippa, by being the first female commander of an Australian maritime task force RIMPAC, which is irregular and very important. Is RIMPAC strictly a military exercise?

Commander Philippa Hay:

Yes. Yes. RIMPAC, Rim of the Pacific, is conducted every two years. It's hosted by the Americans. It's conducted out of Hawaii and we normally have up to, well, it's grown over the years. It used to be just the Five Eyes community that we're all familiar with and it's grown up to around 35 nations now, and they all descend on the exercise areas of Hawaii. And last year for RIMPAC 20, it was reduced down to 12 nations because of COVID, but we still had 22 ships there, submarines and aircraft, and managed to pull off a holy at sea exercise, which was an amazing achievement. Usually in the buildup to RIMPAC, all the ships will come into Pearl Harbour in Hawaii, and we'll conduct nearly a 10 day long Harbour phase, where we will conduct all our briefings, lots of official hospitality to meet and greet everyone.

Commander Philippa Hay:

And you get an opportunity to actually meet your counterparts and build strong relationships quickly so that you can thrash out any interoperability issues and confusion. Not all the nations, of course, are English speaking, so the language barriers are always there. So it's really important to have those opportunities to build that level of familiarity so that the non-English speaking nations can ask their questions that they normally wouldn't want to ask because they wouldn't want to embarrass themselves. So we didn't have that opportunity this year because of COVID. So the 12 nations descended on one another and we met at sea and rolled straight into the exercise.

Michael Veitch:

Well that was certainly a very good year to be at sea 2020, I can tell you. Now 12 nations, 22 ships, one submarine, more than 5,300 Naval personnel from all different nations, all participating in exercise Pacific Rim of which you were in charge. And please take us back to that scenario, I tried to paint earlier, probably not very well of you on the bridge thinking. What goes through your head, Philippa, when you realise that you are in charge of all this and this is the point in your career that you've arrived at. Do you ever doubt yourself? Do you have to rethink the decisions you've made? Do you have to keep checking yourself? Or does everything get to a point where you're confident enough for it to just tick along?

Commander Philippa Hay:

A bit of both. I certainly think I had an equal portion of thrill and terror and enjoy and fear throughout the entire period. That's a lot of people to be responsible for. But also have confidence in the commanding officers out there that they will keep their individual ships safe and empowering them to keep their ships safe and using my own staff. I never view my own successes as my own. I'm part of a team. And I didn't command that taskforce on my own. I had an amazing staff who were supporting me and I had amazing commanding officers of their ships who were supporting me. And I was quite deliberate in always making sure my intent was really clear and well understood so that they can then go enact that and know that if it didn't make sense or if it wasn't working, that they could also come back.

Commander Philippa Hay:

I was very deliberate. I talked about how normally we'd meet each other alongside in Hawaii, prior to sailing. I was very deliberate on arrival in Hawaii to actually write a letter to every single commanding officer and all the sub commanders, introducing myself and reaching out to them in a very personable way. And it was almost like a, I don't want to say a love letter, but it was a very personable letter to all the commanders out there and sent them a little gift. Well, over the course of the exercise, all these letters started coming back to me, like this pen pal arrangement, but what they did was it also opened up the dialogue, and on the evenings, we'd have an online chat and go through all the issues of the day.

Commander Philippa Hay:

And what it meant was I was able to quickly break down any awkwardness between my sub task group commanders and say to them, "Look, this is not working. I have concerns in these areas," or they could come to me saying, "This isn't working. Can we get some guidance here and really break it down?" And I knew we'd hit a high point when people were giving each other nicknames. And these are the task group commanders. And I specifically remember my Japanese commander, his surname was Kiteo Gawa, magnificent man. And I was just calling him Captain Kit, which he thought was fantastic because he was a Nightrider fan. He used to refer to me as Lady P as a term of endearment.

Michael Veitch:

Yes. It sounds like a Navy loving, doesn't it? Wonderful. The Navy has no doubt changed in the time you've been in it, Philippa. Australia has changed some young women who might want to emulate something of your career might feel apprehensive about being in the company of so many men. And I don't blame them. I think women are fair nicer than men. I've always long believed that the world would be a far better place if it was run by them exclusively. But leaving that aside, what advice would you give to a young woman, a girl who wants to achieve something of what you've managed to achieve in your career? I'm sure you get asked this very question. When you visit your school back in Sandy Bay, what do you tell the girls?

Commander Philippa Hay:

In the Navy and the Air Force, we're cusp at nearly up to 25% women. When I joined, it was around nine, 10, and now 25% women. It is still a male dominated environment, but I would say it's not a male dominated cultural environment. The culture of the Navy has been and our institution for the Royal Australian Navy is over 100 years old. However, we have well, and truly evolved, particularly over the past 20 years to a service, which is respectful of the person who puts on the uniform. I have a real thing that I always push. I don't see men and women in the service. That's not because I think they're all Unix. I see officers and sailors. I see somebody who's put on the uniform and is willing to serve.

Commander Philippa Hay:

And I really don't care what happens underneath their uniform, what their race, religion, what sports they play, what books they read. None of that to me, is as relevant as what unites that individual and me is both of our desire to serve and ultimately give our lives and

our family's lives. Because when you serve, you can't serve by yourself, your family have got to buy into it because they ultimately get dragged along. That's what I see.

Michael Veitch:

Well, we can joke about that ambulance in Bougainville, but that was a real scenario. And the risks you were facing were real. And if it happened, your family would be very much involved and impacted, and that's part of the sacrifice, but it can't be a selfish sacrifice, if you know what I mean, because it has far wider consequences.

Commander Philippa Hay:

No, that's right. My ability to continue to serve in the Navy wholeheartedly is due to the support that I get from my husband and my three children. And without that support, I would either be one of two people. I would not be in the Navy, or I'd be an exceptionally selfish individual who was pursuing a Naval career at the expense of my family, which I think would, for me, that's unpalatable. So for anyone listening and for women and men who are out there who wish to join, you're joining to serve. In the Australian Navy, there are no limitations as to which part of the Navy you can serve in. It's a magnificent career. It's magnificent people.

We are not without our faults, like every large organisation where there's an agenda waiting that's against one to the other, but I'd challenge you to go into the lunch room at a school, which has a predominantly female staff room and not find similar challenges that you have in a male-dominated environment, be it a mining work site or in the military. But what the Navy and the ADF does have is really robust policies and very clear direction through our Navy values and our defence values that tells us what we expect from our individuals and as collectively of how to behave so that we are a cohesive fighting force.

Michael Veitch:

Yes, please remind me of my Royal Australian Navy ranks, Philippa. How many rings are you away from making Admiral? So what's next?

Commander Philippa Hay:

Forever, I'll be on a zimmer frame by the time I get there.

Michael Veitch:

I don't think so. I really don't think so. Commander Philippa, Hay, it's been such a great pleasure talking to you today on conversations on the runway. We've learned so much about yourself, about the nuanced nature of service and command and the 21st century in these strange and uncertain times in which we live. Thank you so much for your time today.

Commander Philippa Hay:

Michael, it's been a pleasure. Thank you.