

Reconnecting with the Family

Glenn Haughton, OBE - Episode 001

Addressing the challenges of working away from your family, feeling disconnected, and then integrating back in, with Glenn Haughton, OBE.

Michael: Glenn, you've had a 32-year career. Have you spent a lot of that time away from your family?

Glenn: Yeah, I think I've probably spent a total of about seven out of those 32 years away. That's been a mix of operational tours, which tend to be around six months long but I've had a couple of longer ones that were around nine months. Also, we do a lot of overseas exercises, which are normally between four to six weeks. I've been literally all over the world, from Hawaii to Australia, doing those kind of things. So yeah, there's a lot of time away from the family.

Michael: Was Hawaii an operational tour?

Glenn: No. I mean, Hawaii was a conference. But in terms of the map of the world where I've been, I've actually got a map of the world that I keep and I put pins all over it of all the countries I've been to, and it's extensive. It's mind-blowing the amount of places I've been to. But, in terms of sort of overseas exercises where the army traditionally goes, it's places like Canada, Kenya, Belize, Brunei, and it varies, other countries I've been to as well. It's Scandinavia, all over the world really. It takes you away from your family. A lot of the time, there's not that much communication, depending on what you're doing and certainly on the operations. Many of the listeners will be familiar with countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, the environment and the tempo and what you're getting up to, is very different to those overseas exercises or the conferences that I just touched on in Hawaii.

Michael: What's the difference between an exercise and operations?

Glenn: So, an exercise is normally training for operations. There are certain levels that a unit or an organisation have to reach before they can deploy on the operation. You go away for six weeks (or more) and you build yourself up on a final exercise that prepares you for that operation. So, it's short. Within that six weeks, there's a chance for a little bit of R&R (Rest and Recuperation). There's also, depending on what country you're in, a chance to do some adventure training as well, which kind of adds to the time you're away.

But when you go on an operational tour, there's no such thing as that. You go away on operations and you are there to protect the nation's interests for the best part of six months. Usually, within that six month period, you'll probably get two weeks of R&R, where you can get home and see your family. So, they're very different environments, and operations are much more testing on you and your family than overseas exercises are.

Michael: Let's go into that then, because you did two tours of Afghan. Is that right?

Glenn: Yeah, I did one in 2007 in the early days of the Afghanistan campaign. Then I went again in 2012, and they were both very different. I mean, my family dynamic was different in terms of our children's ages, but also what happened on those tours was different. The early tour was much more kinetic. There was much more gun fighting. The latter tour was much more about avoiding IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices). The country had changed and the dynamic and the way the enemy operated. So that has an effect on you as an individual, on the teams that you're working in, but also has an effect on your family, because they're aware of what's going on in the country at that time.

Michael: Was that stressful?

Glenn: Yeah, it was stressful. I always say when you're in operations as a service person, there are times of stress, because ultimately, you're trying to achieve the mission, and you're trying to make sure that everyone comes home alive and that they haven't got serious life-changing injuries. You all want to get through it in one piece. But I'd suggest there's much more stress for our families at home than there is for those doing the fighting. That's because of the unknown. It's quite a simple existence for those who are operating away, because they know what they're doing every day. But I know for a fact that my family didn't know what I was up to every single day, and that can put a lot of stress on them.

THE
CONVERSATION
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Michael: Do you tell them, if you get those rare phone calls or those interactions with your family? Would you want to know about what their day was like? Or is that frustrating for either one of you?

Glenn: I think it's each to their own, and I think it depends on family dynamics. Me, personally, I would only share so much information and only information that I think my family needed. There were certain things that I definitely wouldn't share, because it just wouldn't help the situation, but some people do like to share. It's not for me to say what somebody should be discussing with their family.

Also, when you're on operations, you have to be careful because there's only so much you can say over the means of communications we've got, for security reasons. I used to like to know what was going on at home. I used to try and speak to the children and find out what had been going on in their daily life because it would cheer me up. Although I'd miss it, it was also really good to hear what they were getting up to. They kind of know what you're getting up to, and I don't think my wife found it that interesting to know exactly what I was getting up to on operations every day. So, I think it was more important for me to listen to what they were doing.

Michael: Hmm, and just decompress a little bit.

Glenn: Yes.

Michael: You went to the first Gulf War as well. How was that different to the 2012 tour of Afghanistan?

Glenn: Yeah. I mean, huge difference, because when I went to the first Gulf War, I think I'd just turned 18 years old. So I had a mum and dad, but I didn't have my own family, as in wife and children. I was very carefree then. It was exciting going to war at that age, and I really didn't think about anything other than myself and what we were going to go and achieve. Fast-forward to my 2007 tour of Afghanistan, my kids were five and ten. That was a different challenge, because your perspective is different. The way you think is just completely different because of your family values and dynamic. The need to stay alive for your family is always in the back of your mind, because you owe it to them to do just that. That was constantly on my mind in the latter tour, whereas when I was in the first Gulf, I really didn't think that much about that kind of thing.

Michael: Hmm. It's hard because I never went away on operations with a family. I was just a young guy really, with no responsibility. I couldn't put myself in that situation now – ripping myself away from the family. Being apart... did that take over your life? Or were you focused on the job and only allowed yourself to go back into family life with those phone calls or letters home?

Glenn: Yeah, you've got to be completely focused on the job, especially when you are operating at that level and when people's lives are at risk. Other organisations could compare their profession to the military one: you've got to stay focused, and it's really important that you do. I think the important thing is that my wife knew I had to be focused as well. So there was never any expectation for me to worry about home, because she knew that I had to do what I had to do, when I had to do it. I would always try and let her know that there's going to be times when I won't be able to get in touch and just know that I'll get in touch as soon as I can. She completely understood that and respected that. But I would always, always, make a point of getting in touch with my family whenever I could, because I think it was really important.

Michael: Hmm. What was homecoming like?

Glenn: Yeah, coming home from operations is always a challenge. The comparison I always use is 'I'm A Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here'. When celebrities go away, it's probably the first time they've been away from their families for that amount of time – three weeks or so, and they get letters from home, and they start crying on TV and all that kind of stuff. I get that, because they've never been separated from their family and their kids. But if you amplify that, and turn that into six to nine months when you are on an operation, where there's a good chance that you may not come back, or if you do, you might be injured, it's a lot different to three weeks in a jungle on a TV programme.

So, to come home after that period of time, without the danger of being injured, or perhaps not coming back, is bad enough. But when the addition of that danger factor is there as well, it just adds to it even more. Although you're doing the job that you're doing and you're massively focused on the mission at hand, there's always that element of countdown to getting home, and everybody looks forward to it. People do chuff charts, and they keep a record of it, and they can't wait to get home.

THE
CONVERSATION
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When you do finally come home from something like an operational tour in Afghanistan, the euphoria is unbelievable to see your children, to see your wife. Just to land in an aeroplane and see the greenery. Just to be back in your home country and to see cars going down the road and to see normal life is an absolutely fantastic feeling. To be back with those that you love is an amazing, amazing feeling and something that I'll never forget from all the operational tours that I've been on.

Michael: For the best part of your career, you've led and managed people. What are the key values to have with leadership, especially when you're in a stressful situation like this?

Glenn: Well, I think you grow older and wiser and more experienced as time goes on. For me, it's about really understanding your workforce. Understanding your team. Understanding every single person within it, because each and every one of your workforce – no matter what position of leadership you're in – are very different.

I used to be pretty bad for expecting everybody to be the same as me or to have a similar family dynamic to me, and that's just not the case. People have got different problems. As a leader, I think it's really important that you show strong leadership and work to understand each and every one of your workforce to appreciate exactly what they're going through at different times. I think that's really important, and it's something that, certainly in my latter years, I've really concentrated on. Sometimes it's hard to do, but it's something you've got to persevere with to look after those people that you lead.

Michael: Hmm. I think empathy is a skill and you have to develop that skill. Have you seen good and bad examples with the people that you've led?

Glenn: Yeah. I've seen good and bad leadership all the way through my career. I think it's important that you learn from both. You learn from people's good examples of leadership, but you've also got to learn, sadly, from the bad examples of leadership. Hopefully those that I have led have learned only good lessons from me. That's all any leader could wish for. But yeah, I just think strong leadership is really important. I think in order to do that, you've got to put yourself out there, and you've got to take criticism, and you've got to open yourself up for people to let you know when you are not displaying good levels of leadership.

Michael: Let's talk about resilience now and mental health. What is the role good mental fitness plays in your leadership, but also managing yourself and your family?

Glenn: Yeah, I learned the hard way in terms of mental fitness, strength and resilience. I always prided myself on being a machine. I never ever thought I would suffer from a mental illness, and I did a couple of years ago. Long story short, I had a burnout. I thought I was the most resilient person on the planet but I wasn't, and it just proved to me that anybody can succumb to poor mental health, and it's important that everyone's prepared for it.

The way you do that is by building your resilience levels. For me, the key to building resilience levels, particularly for mental health, is by training your mind, your body and your spirit. I do it every day, and I try to instil it into those that I lead now, because it doesn't matter how big, tough and hard you think you are, mental health can come and take your legs from under you at any time. So, resilience is really, really important. There's no point building it once you're in the moment. You've got to build it before you get to the moment, and then you've got to have it in the bank for when things do get a little bit messy and when you need to draw on those resilience levels.

Michael: You meditate a lot. You do yoga and more conventional physical exercise as well. Do you do anything else? How do you manage yourself, day to day?

Glenn: Routine is key for me, especially over the COVID period we've been through. It's been really important for me to keep a week the same. But, yeah, I do a lot of physical fitness. I do a lot of mindfulness and meditation, but I'm not one of those hippies that sits there and does it for 15, 20 minutes listening to a Buddhist monk. I tend to do it as part of my daily battle rhythm. If I'm walking, if I'm doing my fitness, I'm just conscious of my mind all the time, and that plays a really important part in my wellbeing now. So, it's just something I do a lot now that I didn't do before, and I'm conscious of it, and that whole point of the mind, body, spirit is something that I stick by every single day now, and I make sure that I incorporate it in my daily life.

Michael: Glenn, thank you so much, and we will leave it there.