

Geointeresting Podcast Transcript

Episode 12: Agency leaders reflect on Women's Equality Day

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Welcome to Geointeresting, presented by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency. In honor of Women's Equality Day, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency Deputy Director Sue Gordon and NGA's director of operations, U.S. Air Force Maj. Gen. "UV" Linda Urrutia-Varhall, discuss their experiences as leaders and intelligence-community employees. Mrs. Gordon's IC career spans more than 25 years, and Gen. UV has served in the Air Force for nearly 33 years. Stay tuned for Geointeresting!

NGA: Good morning, ladies. What inspired you to pursue a career in national security?

SUE: So, for me it is what my family did. My grandfather, my father, my brother — they were all in the military, but public service, national service is who I am. It's who they are, and [they] kind of passed it on to me. I actually made the choice twice. When I started I would have stated that was it. After I left and I came back, it was more of a personal choice of who I am now. And I have found that I love the sense of purpose, I love the feeling of carrying the weight of responsibility. Quite frankly, I love being the decision-maker.

NGA: And UV, what about you?

UV: I came from a small town in [inaudible], Colorado. And none of my family was in national security; my uncles were drafted. When I was 13, I went up to the Air Force Academy, and I saw them marching, and I actually told my uncle that one day I would graduate from the school. And he looked at me and said, "But they don't let women attend the Air Force Academy." I said, "Well, just watch me." And sure enough, about 10 years later, I was the fifth class of women in 1985. And I will tell you the opportunities that have been presented — I joined the Air Force so my family could see the world. I've never looked back. Before I knew it, I was already at 20 and now I'm at 30 years. And I can't get enough of it. I just love it; what I get to do for my country.

NGA: That's wonderful.

SUE: I love that, the "just watch me." It kind of epitomizes who you were over at the Pentagon, at your last job; epitomizes your first — how many months here?

UV: Just one month.

SUE: Yes, your first month here — "just watch me."

UV: But I thought it was so cool, because I even forgot about it, but when I graduated he reminded me that I said that 10 years ago, which I didn't even remember.

NGA: Is there any one particular experience that you look back on as a defining moment in your career, either of you, or in your life?



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SUE: So many, because I've had a career of a bunch of distinct careers that have added up in my career. I think for me, it was early on in my career. I was a GS-10, band 2, and I had left technical analysis, and I had went over, and I was part of the building collections systems. And I was given \$50 million and kind of a blank piece of paper to come up with a new concept for a collections system that had a \$3 billion price tag. And they said, "Come up with something that is cheaper than that." And that was pretty [inaudible] because I was young, and it was big. But the best part is it turned out OK, but in the midst of it, I had a massive failure that taught me everything about how much you need to know to be good; how much the technical solution isn't the whole part of the game. And the best part is when I just really messed it up, and I told my boss, and my boss said, "Eh, I've seen worse." So if I think about that event, it both informed how hard I wanted to work and how good a leader I want to be so that anyone underneath me can go; anything bad can happen [inaudible].

UV: And I've had a couple. I've always said, since I've started here, to move an organization forward, you have to be uncomfortable. One of the uncomfortable positions the Air Force put me in was they put me as a base commander. I've been intel my whole 30 years, and I was a base commander, so instead of looking at JWICS, I'm looking at a fire-response team or I own a golf course or even the commander's toilet doesn't work. So it was those types of things that I had to do. And it made me very, very uncomfortable, but I got to tell you; it really forced me to look outside of my career and just use the management and use the leadership techniques that I had been taught. The other one was having the great opportunity to work for Director Clapper for almost three years. Once, when he was USDI, then I moved over with him after his confirmation — the world that he showed me: he taught me to be comfortable in any environment; the way that he handles himself; the world leaders I got to meet. He just showed me a world I don't think I would have even had the chance to be part of. He was just a great, great leader for me to get to work with him and learn his skills the last three years.

NGA: Is there a particular women that stands out in your mind as a trailblazer for other women or one that particularly set the bar for you?

SUE: General UV.

UV: And mine is Sue Gordon. Nah, I got to tell you, the reason I came here was because of Sue Gordon. When I was deputy at the Air Force, I was not happy with the relationship we had between the Air Force and NGA. One of the things we did as soon as Ms. Gordon came in was to work with her as a deputy, as I was deputy at the Air Force. And the things we managed to do in the last three years was just totally amazing, including giving OPIR data to NASIC. And then when this opportunity came up, I specifically called Robert and said, "I want to come here and work. I want to work with your team, and I want to work with Sue Gordon."

NGA: How has that experience been?

UV: It's been great. It's everything I expected and more.

SUE: So I was not really being as good as I think I sounded. And I think if you look over the course of my career, there have been women throughout. Some I got along with; some I didn't — Stephanie O'Sullivan, who I saw when she was junior, and we knew what great meant she had [it], and now I get a chance to watch her lead. What characterized those relationships was a

lot of what UV said was what she was looking for: someone you can pick up the phone and talk to; someone you can, I'll say, fight with but fight with purpose and know that it is going to be OK. I've just had a whole slew of women leaders. But I will tell you, as many women leaders who have inspired me, I can cite a bunch of male leaders who either taught me or allowed me or encouraged me to, in the cliché, let my light shine. And Robert is one of those. Early in my career, a guy named Jim Parsons, who just let me go as far as I could go. And so, while there are lots of women, and I feel a great infinity for them because of the trail they blazed, I would say that there are just as many men who wanted me to be everything that I could be and encourage them.

NGA: What steps is NGA taking now to be more diverse and inclusive with its future workforce?

SUE: So I'll start because I've been here longer. So I think it starts with being really clear and being really forthright about the future we see; and try to reach to every human in the agency, so they can latch on to that vision, contribute to the vision and then bring their whole selves — a little bit of what I was saying in the last one. We have some really amazing programs. One of my favorite we do is for the specific employee research groups and celebrating holidays. We don't just leave it to ODE, but it's a KC that sponsors that; it tends to take on a flavor. And there are things that we need to do organizationally: we need to get feedback and surveys to make sure we have no micro biases that would ever cause us to be a place that would not be attractive to anyone with talent and desire and not be a place where people [are] fulfilled if they put the energy and effort in. So to me, what we are mostly doing, and we have a distance to go, is to make sure that we have a compelling vision that is successful to everybody and depends on everyone's excellence and differences.

UV: One of the things I've noticed in my past month is you have to have the right people — whether it be a woman, whether it be an Asian-American, whether it be Hispanic, whether it be African-American — in mid-levels and senior levels because the junior levels will identify with that. If they see somebody of their same type that is in a senior position, that is in a mid-level management position, it doesn't seem out of reach. And I think that NGA has done a very, very good job now, both at the senior level and the mid-level, because that is who millennials, and that's our new workforce, look up to them and say, "They've broken the ground, so I can follow." The other piece that's important as we get our younger folks in: people call us the trailblazers; they are as much the trailblazers as we are because we should reflect America's population, and we don't, and in the IC overall. We need to work harder on that one, even our folks that come in today that Robert is going to go ahead and swear people in, I think, as we speak now. They are also trailblazers, and I think if they can embrace that and understand for the folks that come behind them, they need to pay it forward, I think that is a good thing to teach.

SUE: And I think, just to riff on a couple things you said, I think this is the topic for our success. One is why the marketplace is so important is you need to keep working so that you aren't making systemic choices that have a latent bias in them. If you aren't making opportunities obvious to everybody; if you aren't ensuring that your assessment of people's capabilities are not biased by the person who proceeded them, you're going to get better. And the second thing is why this is so important and why UV's talk about getting leaders with all different faces and backgrounds into the mid-level is there is not one face of excellence. And the more diversity you have in your leadership, it really does lift all boats. Everyone will see, I will tell you, not every man has the same approach to leadership. But if we only have one style, people will self-select

out. So for me, bringing diversity into leadership, not only showing people that it is possible for them, it shows everybody that excellence doesn't have a particular look to it.

NGA: What advice would you offer to a woman considering a career in the intelligence community?

UV: First of all, it is a great time to join the intelligence community. We don't see gender; we don't see diversity. We need all types, from all walks of life — to how they think — to be an analyst. The opportunities are just fantastic to join. That is what I would say.

SUE: Yes, I'd say do it. It is such a dynamic, complex, fascinating world where the answers aren't narrow, so you get to be a part of trying to define it. And the second thing I'd say is remember, even if you join a particular agency, the point is not that agency; the point is the combination of what we each bring to advance national security. And never has it been more possible to achieve the kind of integration that the problems demand. So the second thing I'd say is join. But understand your career isn't going to be just in your confines of your agency or just in your craft because the point is what we are doing is in the collective and the opportunities certainly there to do that.

UV: For intel, it is ever evolving. I mean, the stuff that our analysts look at today — it's what I call a mosaic. Where I came in, we were looking at a puzzle piece, and a puzzle had a specific place; went into the overall puzzle. Now it's a mosaic. Now I'm asking them to look at Russia. I'm asking them to look at China. I'm talking about the Zika virus. I'm talking about the Rio Olympics. So we have five or six things that we are asking our analysts to look at, at the same time, to me which is a different way of thinking. And every day I come to work it is a new adventure because I never know what is going to be at the pps intel meeting, so it is just fascinating, exciting work to me, and it is never boring.

SUE: So I have been in the IC 36 years — never been bored a day. Also, one last piece, because you prompted me with your discussion to say this: another outstanding woman here [is] Karyn Hayes Ryan, who is our CAE. She shared an article that I think is really important for everyone and that is, "Fall in love with your problem, not your solution." And I think this is really great advice, especially now. It is a world of expertise, but just staying narrowly selfish on what you are doing without picking your head up is not the way that we are going to succeed. Fall in love with the problem, not the solution, and you're going to be OK.

NGA: Great advice. Is there anything you would like to add, either of you?

SUE: I cannot imagine a better moment to be in NGA. I just can't. With all the things going on in the world, what we bring can be a unique contribution. We provide unique intelligence, and we provide a great framework for everyone else. We have leadership that is expansive in its thinking that is broad in its background. And organizationally, we are aware of where we need to go, and we are aware of the work we need to do to make sure everyone is hooked in, so I think this is just a brilliant moment and a brilliant moment to be a woman.

UV: And I would challenge the workforce, and it doesn't matter what your gender or what diversity you are, but come forward with the ideas. I'd like to think we have some great ideas upstairs at the sixth floor, but that is not where the great ideas generate from; they generate



from the person that this is his second day at NGA or people who have been here for 20 years and have a better way to do business, and I encourage them to come forward with those ideas — those innovation things that we are not even aware of or that we may not have thought of — to come forward and bring that. You would be surprised how much very little money that can change the whole mindset. That is what Sue was talking about. We are only 20 years old. We're a babe in the world compared to DIA or CIA, so let's be forward; let's try new things; let's be innovative; let's work with our millennials to say, "How would you do things versus the way I do things 30 years ago?" I mean, that is where it is going to get exciting to where we can go.

NGA: Thank you, ladies, very much.

SUE: You bet!

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