

Rabia Siddique: Insights on resilience and fortitude

How being taken hostage in Iraq turned into a fight for equality and justice

WORDS BY FELICITY MOORE

Forcing change upon institutions like the army, institutions that are steeped in centuries of tradition, rules and discipline, is like trying to turn 180 degrees while steering a 40,000 bulk carrier steaming at 45 knots – it's slow and before you even start, the very idea seems ludicrous.

And when former a British Army Officer, Perth-born and raised Rabia Siddique, decided she would take the British Ministry of Defence to court for employment discrimination over its failure to recognise her valour in an Iraq war hostage negotiation and escape, the chances of success seemed equally ludicrous.

But for someone who has already been taken hostage by Iraqi troops when a hostage negotiation to free two SAS soldiers when disastrously wrong, staring down the British Army might, at first glance, have seemed less terrifying.

Ms Siddique was sent in to negotiate the release of two SAS soldiers, but at the last minute the compound where she was negotiating with an Iraqi judge was overrun by Shiites and Ms Siddique and the two SAS soldiers were held at gunpoint for nine hours. They were eventually busted out when the army sent a tank through the perimeter wall and Ms Siddique and the two soldiers made a run for it through a hail of gunfire.

In the subsequent months, the two SAS soldiers were fully debriefed and recognised for their bravery, while Ms Siddique's experience was dismissed without recognition.

"(Making the decision to file the lawsuit) was absolutely terrifying. It was probably the most frightening battle that I've ever fought (that wasn't health related) and I didn't take it lightly.

"It was a decision that was made when it was clear to me that all other

avenues were exhausted," she said.

"I knew I had a strong case, but I also knew all of their tactics and I knew that there would be intimidation, and there would be a slur campaign and I knew they would try everything they could to scare me out of it.

"But I also knew myself very well and I knew that I would always regret not holding them to account," she said.

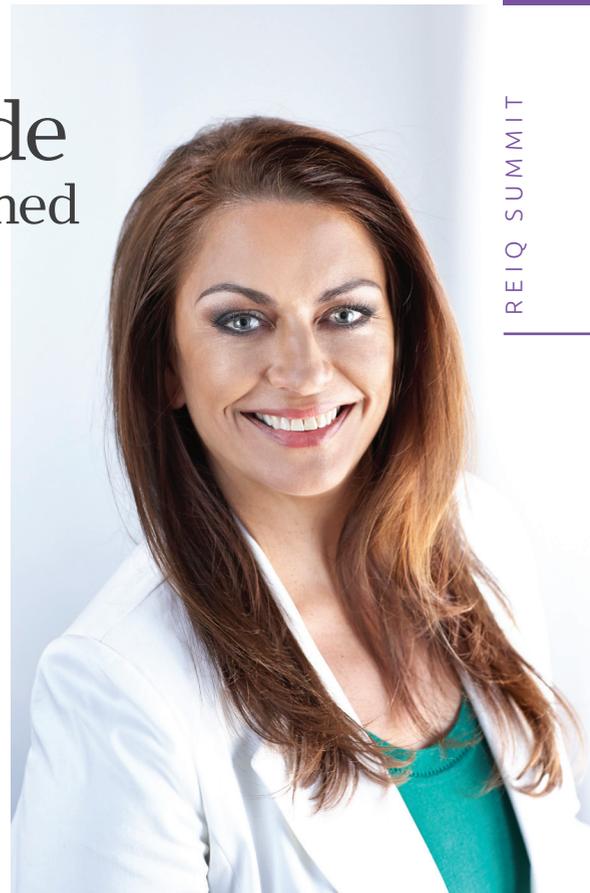
The case settled in 2008 and Ms Siddique said she had seen evidence of permanent change taking place within the British Army within 12 months of her case.

"Part of the conditions of my case was that I insisted on there being an inquiry and that lessons would be learned, and that certainly happened within the year.

"I know for a fact that policies were changed regarding ethnic minorities and women, I know the dialogues and debate about the role of women on the frontline fundamentally shifted and the other thing that I know happened in the same year as my case being heard was that the first woman, the first of then a number of women, was recognised for bravery in the theatre of war by receiving a military cross," she said.

The ripple effect of actions like Ms Siddique's is that change is taking place in military forces elsewhere, including Australia.

Former Australian Army Chief David Morrison has made several high profile



statements, both while leading the Australian Army and since retirement, around issues of consent, of support for homosexuals in the military and for transgenders in the armed forces.

"It's interesting now that we see (these institutions) being more reflective of the community they serve and questioning the way we treat and view others, particularly our women, our ethnic minorities, our transgender soldiers, and we need to make room for them because if they are skilled enough and committed enough to serve, then we should make every effort to encourage them and include them," Ms Siddique said.

However, without the bravery of individuals willing to stand up and force change, regardless of the personal cost, change would not happen, especially in monoliths like the armed forces.

Ms Siddique will present her keynote presentation at the REIQ Summit this October, where she will share insights from her experience but where she will also talk about the importance of resilience and how to become more resilient in the face of overwhelming challenges.

Make sure you get your tickets today – REIQSummit.com.au.