

Something Extra EP 021 – Robert Teschner

Lisa Nichols: Rob, I'm so excited to have you here today with us, and I can't wait for our listing audience to hear your story. We have a real Top Gun maverick guy with us, but it's not maverick, it's Cujo... So, it is wonderful to have you here with us, and I can't wait for people to hear your story, so I just want to go ahead and jump in. Let's talk about walk us through a little bit about how you grew up.

Robert Teschner: Thank you, Lisa for having me on this podcast. I think you doing extraordinary work with it in preparation for being here today, I had the privilege of listening to some of your previous interviews, and it's a fantastic job with an outstanding mission that you're bringing forward. So I'm privileged to be here today. Yeah, and I'm also very, very blessed to have a background that warrants potentially being here and I think about that all the time, now that I have some distance from it. I was very, very fortunate to have had a career in the United States Air Force, to have served our nation defending us forward as part of an outstanding team of teams. Along the way, I had the privilege of learning the fundamentals of leadership and practicing it for about 20 years. 24 if you count the Air Force Academy and I've been part of high performing teams for almost all of that time. I took all of that for granted frankly Lisa while I was an active duty, it was just the thing that was... But now looking back on it, what an amazing education that I was blessed to have starting in the summer of 1991, when I went off to the Air Force Academy, as a 17-year-old freshman all the way through until the end, the last day of 2015. So I'm just so thankful for that. So we can talk about any of those pieces that you'd like to.

Nichols: Absolutely as you were talking, I was just thinking sometimes I think it's our youth that we really don't really get it when we're younger and then as we get older, we can look back and go. Wow, I think we just appreciate things more, for all our youngsters out there. As we mature. I feel like. And you can look back. So talk to me a little bit now, did you have people in your family that had been in the military. How were you thinking at a young age? This is what I wanted to do and talk to us a little bit about that.

Teschner: I was to my family's history, long history of service. My grandfather specifically, I was a fighter pilot at the tail end of World War II. Alright, so I grew up seeing pictures of the airplane that he was qualified in. My father was in the Air Force, and so I was born into an Air Force family, my father won the Bronze Star Medal in Vietnam, when he was getting ready to retire around that 1989.

I remember thinking, how are we going to survive not being in the Air Force any longer? This is my family. I felt like I was retiring. And it was a sad experience. Alright, I did not want to leave. I had such a joy of being around the people that we're always moving experiencing new things together. When you were overseas you're part of very tight knit communities. And so for me, it was a race to get back in and I was just starting my junior year, in high school and I said, Alright there's no doubt about it. I must join up. And I had long ago decided that flying airplanes would be really a Top Gun came out, what 1986 or so, and that established that it must be fighter aviation for me. And so my junior year applied to the Air Force Academy, and that was blessed to initially be denied, but then on the very last day of my finals... My mom got a call from the senator's office saying that I got in, so I don't know how many people had turned down their appointments, but I was able to take over that next I was the next person in line and got in there. And so that translates pretty nicely into now as a father, I mentioned to my kids all the time, "If you

want to win, you got to play the game, you got to put yourself out there and you never know what might happen. Very, very fortunate to be part of the class of 1995.

Nichols: That's interesting because you had a disappointment, probably when you initially were turned down, you were probably very disappointed, right?

Teschner: I certainly was and I put a lot of eggs into that basket, frankly. So when that didn't come through to cause me to have to adjust and come up with a plan B. I created a contingency plan on the fly and it was going to be a good one, and I'm sure everything would have turned out just fine, if we had gone down that path, but it made the eventual acceptance even more powerful later on, I found out that two of my very, very good friends from the academy had also been denied acceptance had also gotten in at the very last minute and all of us went on to fly fighters. So that's kind of cool. That is... I wasn't alone.

Nichols: Alright, so you went to the Air Force Academy and you really had a pretty stellar career and just kind of talk about that journey a little bit how you started, what you ended up doing, because you ended up doing some really cool stuff.

Teschner: Yeah, blessed doesn't count really. It's not powerful enough of a word to describe everything that happened to me. So the four years of the academy, the Air Force changed the rules on us. It was when I was accepted the fact that if you graduated with pilot qualification, you were going to go to pilot training. My freshman year, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force came to the Academy and said, "I'm sorry we have too many pilots, only 225 of you is going to go on to pilot training and I'm really sorry for all of those of you who this affects. So the timing was right. I had still had three years to make sure that I was competitive and I was blessed that the time that I spent there was well spent, I got to go through the glider program did very well in gliders. I got to go through the free fall parachuting program did really well for that and I was picked for the academy parachute team, I did really well militarily. And the sum total of all of these things. Plus my grade said I was one of the 225 and I got to go to Shepherd Air Force Base in Wichita Falls, Texas.

The EURO NATO joint Pilot Training Program and train with our NATO partners to become a pilot, pilot training. It turns out, was a natural thing for me, so I was answering this call that was deep within me. I was really gifted at flying airplanes, I graduated top of my class I got a chance to pick my airplane and I picked the F15, which was hand-assembled here at McDonald Douglas, St. Louis, Missouri. I tell you to this day, I'm a huge fan, I'm a huge fan of everybody that's been part of all of the programs that we're blessed to have but specifically the F15 program. It's a magnificent airplane. So think about it this way. Here it is a young 20-something-year-old is given the keys to fly one of these machines. That can go so fast. We're merging at 2000 miles an hour, roughly, okay, and go nine times the force of gravity, can launch eight air-air missiles and 940 rounds of an eternal gun to protect our great nation. So as a dream come true, absolutely dream come true. I graduated top of my class at F15 school, I went to Eglin Air Force Base, at Fort Walton Beach, Florida, and began to learn teamwork and how to become a member of a team of teams in the aviation context.

Again, all of us taken for granted but part of the program from day number one, and you mentioned at the top that I was a real life Maverick. I was because... And if you think about it, Maverick. Go back now to Top Gun. Maverick was a solo operator until the very end where he has the epiphany that he really needs to be a good teammate, and then once he's a good teammate the team wins right when he's operating as a solo operator. The team doesn't win. I picked the F15 team because I was tired of having somebody in my back seat, offering my thoughts, about how to

land, how to take off how to fly, formation, how to do navigation, whatever the case was. I wanted to be by myself. Luckily, the Air Force taught me the lessons that we learned all the way back in the World War One, that if I'm flying by myself, I'm going to get killed. I've got to have mutual support right after your wing man, you have to have a wingman and the one of the fundamental things that you do for what, another is. You look out for each other. Literally, the entire flight. So I picked that up and all these things came together and it worked naturally to where I rapidly accelerated through my qualification program. I became an instructor pilot in the F-15, and I was asked to go to the Air Force weapons instructor, course, and the Air Force version of Top Gun.

Nichols: I want to talk about one little story. So I think you've had one of your students and you guys were doing a... Would you call it Dog fight, right? Yes, can you talk about that story? You know which one you're talking about?

Teschner: It was one of those moments where it's surreal as it happens and reflecting back on you, go "Holy cow, so the dog fight the one versus one maneuver that were flying that day, the kind of profile we're flying. We got about five miles apart from one another, simulating that we just seen each other and that we were both competitors, so we were going against another, and as soon as we saw each other, we turned towards each other and tried to position ourselves for this fight, and the intent of the fight was to get into position to be able to employ weapons against the other one person that could do that fastest and employ valid weapons wins. It's a very exciting profile. There's a lot of speed, there's a lot of Gs. You're fighting against the force of gravity, you're making really important judgments in a very time-limited sense as we're turning towards one another.

I'm trying to abide by the Air Force training rules which say you need to have 500 feet of separation, at the point where your airplanes pass. It's for safety. We're not in combat we want to, we want to protect ourselves. It's hard to judge 500 feet frankly, but we have, I mean we have to, to speed were going in the conditions. But you can sort of get you get the side picture for what that sort of looks like. So I'm aiming to get my 500 feet and every time that I'd point in a given direction my opponent mirrors me, so he points to the exact same piece of sky, so that I point away from him towards another piece of sky and He mirrors me exactly and you only have a few of these before, you're at the merge and I realize we are going to hit one another. It was plain to me, in my mind that this is going to be a mid-air collision potentially epic proportion. And goodness gracious, I can't believe it. So at the very last second I do this lasted maneuver and as his airplane goes by me time slows down.

I've read about this happening to people. It actually does take place time slows down. And as his airplane roared by mine, I could see each individual rivet. Each individual rivet. You could see where the screws were and he passes a couple of feet away from my airplane, and as I look back over my shoulder, I go, "Oh my gosh, he must have taken my tails off because they said a few feet up into there, and he missed that too and we were okay, So, here's the takeaway after that. And we had plenty of fuel left to go back and continue our training. Those missions are really valuable. You got to maximize them every time that you have them because we don't fly as often as we'd like to or need to frankly. But in this particular case where we almost hit one another, the only option was...

I called Fort immediately. Let's get back together, let's go back home, "let's debrief this situation. So we find out why we almost hit one another, so that we never do this again, and when you look at fighter aviation. Specifically, we're pretty strict in the way that we go about our missions, we always start with planning, and that's foundational to the approach that we use across the military, but specifically in fighter aviation. With high-performing fighter teams. We never go forth and just execute. We plan not necessarily because of the plan that we come up with as we know that the enemy gets a vote. Alright, there's always going to be something that disrupts even the greatest plan, but it's the planning process that gets us to think through the threat, the weather, the intelligence that we have, the

different options that we have based upon what we think we know the assumptions we're making, the contingency plans, we need to build to be effective when things start to fall apart, etcetera. So we always start with planning, we try to be inclusive in our planning, so it's not just one leader, that says This is the plan, we bring in all of the teams together to plan collaboratively so that we come up with a really good plan, right but we know that not everybody can be part of that process.

So we always start the mission, the day of or the night of, with the briefing of the plan, where we tell the story of how we're going to succeed and truly it's a story to include the good, the bad, and the ugly of what might happen. And then we go forth and execute, and then we never finish a mission until we've debriefed what it was that went down and this debrief process, it's really it's our practice of accountable leadership whereas teams, we go back and hold ourselves accountable for the decisions we made during the planning process for the way that we communicated the plan to the members of our team, and then the way that we all individually, executed during the course of the mission. It's a wonderful, wonderful process that traces its history all the way back to World War 1. When the first fighter pilots learned it the Germans did at first, they did it very effectively once the Allies, figured it out, we became very effective at it, and we've been doing it ever since.

AD: And so, we're going to take a quick break and then we'll be back with Rob Teschner.

Nichols: Rob, you just talked about planning, executing and debriefing. Does this apply and other pieces of your life does apply business?

Teschner: Absolutely. And in fact, what I would propose Lisa, is that we hold off on me, giving that full answer and until we've explored a little bit about my personal life and I'll try to bring this back in.

Nichols: Oh, okay, that sounds good. Well, I do know you have and a life interruption and I want you to talk a little bit about that. What was that life interruption for you?

Teschner: Okay, so I was privileged among other things. To command an operational F-22 squadron as a lieutenant colonel, I went off to headquarters US European Command at Stuttgart, Germany for a staff assignment a pretty good staff assignment, but I was called back from that pretty quickly to return to the F-22 in a more senior capacity. I was also selected for promotion to full colonel. So the career was going really, really, really well right up until the point where I was diagnosed with rectal cancer. I mean, I joke about this but I have friends that ask. Is it too soon for us to make fun of you for the rectal cancer? So in February of 2014, my life was totally turned upside down my wife was four and a half months pregnant with our fourth child. Were overseas.

We're trying to understand what the ramifications are. I ask the gentleman who would eventually become my surgeon, hey can I go back and fly after we remove this huge chunk of my lower colon he said I would not recommend it. There's no guarantee that you won't fall apart a rip apart inside. We go from... Things are going great in life across the board to what can I do now? And in fact, really, the aftermath of the colon resection was much worse than any of the cancers preparation stuff, and I was fortunate that I didn't have to do radiation or chemotherapy but we still had a lot of anxiety about this, we had the surgeries to get ready for we had multiple surgeries with some ramifications associated with them, but once it was put back together again Lisa, my body was not functional, I could not live like a normal human being and I was basically trapped. I could barely make it to work and back. I'll spare you the details. But it was a bad time, and it lasted for a number of years to the point where I thought to myself, "I'm never going to get out of this. I couldn't take any of the jobs that I was offered.

My wife and I chose to retire early and accept the reduction in a rank so that we could come back to St. Louis which I've always considered to be home to have family nearby in case things go south again for me. So for contingency planning purposes, but I really was left with very, very few options. I couldn't fly, I couldn't function I was best in my own basement, and I couldn't even for the longest time, be trusted to take care of our kids outside of the house because there was no guarantee that I could stay with them, if that makes sense. Alright, so it was a big life change.

Nichols: So, talk to us about if you had employed the plan-execute, debrief what could have been different?

Teschner: Alright, so let me lead into this by saying Lisa that everything that took place ended up being a tremendous blessing. At the time we saw it as a tremendous blessing, if you can believe that. It meant a lot more time with the family, it meant an opportunity to hopefully throttle back a little bit from a real go-go-go-mentality that we had while I was in active duty. There was an empathy, the growth in me that hadn't existed prior to just because I had never experienced any sort of thing. And the list of good goes on and on, so just please know that there is so much good that came from all of this. But at the end of the day, I am responsible for what it was that happened to me, and it all goes back down to the fact that while I was teaching planning briefing executing and debrief at the highest possible level, I was... The Air Force's subject matter expert for debriefing at our weapon school.

I wasn't applying any of that as a life skill it was something that I did at work, I did it very, very well, at work but I didn't connect the dots and see how this would be applicable at home. So here's the part that's painful to share but must be shared in order for the story to have any goodness for other people to learn. So the first indications that my personal system was not right or well, we're all the way back in 2003, early 2004. I'm a combat veteran, I'm a Top Gun instructor. I'm a busy guy, and I'm an American male, so my inclination to go do anything about this was very, very low. In fact, I didn't share any of this with anyone. Now mind you, my wife, she really cares about me. She would have suggest that. I do something about this. My doctors would have suggested that I do something, I think my in-laws, my father-in-law as a doctor, my mother and I was a nurse. They would have suggest... I had a whole team there that could have potentially put me on the right path to success but... but I didn't tell anybody. I see this as being my team, my team was at work, I was focused on work, didn't have a home team in that sense. Okay, so I didn't have a plan for my health and wellness, I certainly didn't communicate or brief my plan or the absence thereof to anybody.

As we went along, I never debriefed, how it was that I was doing so that when the symptoms came back in 2013, I finally said alright. I may want to now talk about this. I'm not currently flying so there's an opportunity to get this address before I go back to the F-22. Told my wife long story short, we went to see a German doctor, he said, I regret to inform you that you have this huge tumor growing in your lower coon. I estimate it's been growing for 10 years. I tell you what the Germans are incredibly precise and I'm very thankful for Dr. Meyer in the outstanding work that he did, he was 100% correct. So the takeaway for me on this is that my own team is the most important team that I'm on, and so let's work together as a team, let's set our end state, or desired objectives. What it is that we want to do as a team together, let's build an effective plan to get there? Let's communicate regularly.

Nichols: And you have 5 kids. Rob, I bet you're doing things differently with them. I bet you guys are planning. There is so much wisdom packed into this and I see this time and time again with type A super-charged people, that sometimes they don't think those things apply to their family, but they do. You need a life plan. You need to talk about those things.

Teschner: Yes, there's a gentleman in Hal Elrod, the author of *The Miracle Morning*. In his book, he talks about how you can be effectively a superstar in one phase of your life, and kind of a dud in the other, right? That was me to a T. So what I'm interested in is how do you effectively get those parts of that you're currently not doing so well in up to the same level as the superstar part of you, and that's where this planning briefing executing and debriefing. It works, it just works, it works for faith and works for relationships. It works for health and wellness. There's no domain in which you can't apply this to extreme effect.

Nichols: Huge takeaway. I have a dear friend, he's actually been on the podcast Jack Lannom. And he talks about their six dimensions of the human well-being and you've got to look at all of those and hopefully it's a perfect circle. So sometimes it could be a lopsided circle. Yes, and so if there is a takeaway here, you've got to focus on all of those things and it prioritized, right? Because it starts at home.

Teschner: If it doesn't, then there's going to be big problems. We experienced that. I mentioned that there was so much good that came of this Lisa and I will re-emphasize that my life was saved by my beautiful bride, Diane. First doctor that I went to see. You said you're young, you're fit, you're fine, don't worry about it. The second one said the same thing. She insisted that I keep on going back and the other piece is, my beautiful children. There were four at the time, three of whom were aware of what was going on. They showed unconditional love to me through the darkest time in my life. A painful recovery from this was truly horrific, they were fantastic. I will always be thankful to them for that. And the good just keeps upon if a mother-in-law, and mom everybody that just came and supported us and helped us.

Nichols: So much, packed in there. Yes, well let's talk about... Oh goodness, we could just go on and on about different lessons, but I know that our listening audience is going to be inspired. I think that they're going to be encouraged, I think that they're going to be hopefully abide towards action from listening to your story, Rob. This is *Something Extra Podcast*, let's talk about does something extra that every leader needs.

Teschner: It's something that I see often misapplied in a number of different ways. So, I'll offer taking full ownership of whatever it is that we're doing. And by that, I mean to say if we've got a program that we're responsible for, if there's a system that is ours, we as leaders, take full responsibility for seeing this thing through, no matter what it takes, and that's not to say that we work 200 hour weeks, even if that's possible. I don't know, mathematically you can get there, but the point is, we take full responsibility for doing whatever it takes to get the mission accomplished, total ownership of it. There's no blaming anybody else when things don't go right.

We take ownership for getting this thing across the line. Tied to that. What's equally important is, is that we share the successes that take place there. Alright, and I saw a beautiful example of this. I volunteer some of my time at a hospital here, working on their patient safety committee, one of their teams have been working real hard on a patient safety initiative. It was a really tough initiative, and we came in for one of our monthly meetings, and they had achieved what it was that they had set out to which many people thought it wouldn't be able to. And the young nurse, who was in charge when she was congratulated for the job that she had done, as the leader said, "It's not me, it's the team. They overcame everything and got this thing done. Now, there's no doubt in my mind that if things hadn't gone well, she would have accepted full responsibility and would've come with a plan for how it was the going to redirect but when they achieved it, she immediately deflected any of the celebration, any of the glory and she meant it. This is the part that told me that she truly owned it, she meant that her team had done what needed to

be done. I saluted her then and I still think back on that as an outstanding example I learned from her that day of the kind of leader that I'd like to be for my teams.

Nichols: Oh that's perfect, I love that. Well, I want to give you the opportunity if there's anything that you've got coming up that's really exciting, I want to give you the opportunity to talk about that and how our listeners can get plugged in.

Teschner: You're very, very gracious, Lisa so thank you for this, I will tell you that we're coming up on the five-year anniversary of the first surgery, it's March 13th, and that's kind of a big day in the cancer as a story. And so the way that we're celebrating that in the Teschner household is we're releasing my very first book, debrief to win. And this is a labor of love, it's telling the story of what it is that I learned as the subject matter expert for the Air Force and how to do this accountability stuff for a high performing team, and it's captured in a way that makes it really relatable. So it comes out on March 13th and if your listeners are so inclined, I would love it. If they'd go to Amazon and maybe pick up a copy, it'll be in hard cover, and also the paperback, but that would be the day to do it. We're going to reclaim March 13th as being an awesome happy wonderful day in our household.

Nichols: Yes, and I have a copy of the book and it is just chock-full of great lessons. And so, if you've enjoyed just this a little snippet of what you've heard from Rob get the book or Cujo I should say, I get the book and you can take a deeper dive, so thank you so much for being with us this has just been a pleasure.

Teschner: The pleasure is all mine. Thank you for having me on here today.