

PARLIAMENTARY PA

EA Sonja Firth reveals what life was like as advisor to the Foreign Minister of Australia during a potential global crisis and international hostage situation.
By **Kirstie Bedford.**



IT WAS DECEMBER 31ST 1999 and the world was on edge. There were fears the so called 'millennium bug' would shut down all computers threatening the operations of corporations, utility companies, finance industries and government agencies.

Sitting in Parliament in Canberra, Sonja Firth, one of the four EAs to the Foreign Minister of Australia, Alexander Downer, had agreed to take on the shift, thinking it might be an 'experience' - but she could never have prepared herself for what transpired.

"The most immediate concern was what might happen when the clocks struck midnight. There was a feeling anything could happen, an element of apprehension. We took it seriously and had to make contingency plans. If you were complacent about anything, big issues could happen."

On top of that, the relatively new EA had to relay information to the minister about Australian banker Peter Ward, who had been captured and held hostage after Kashmiri militants hijacked an Indian aircraft bound for Afghanistan, and information was also coming in on another matter from Russia authorities.

"I had officials in Russia giving me information and names to pass back to the minister and I couldn't pronounce them, and I had to keep him updated about the hostage situation and Y2K all while he was and at an event in Adelaide. I was a new EA feeling a lot of responsibility!"

The night is one she now looks back on as significant in helping establish who she is today.

"I really learned a lot because there are so many situations you are thrown in. You never know what might happen. At one stage during the East Timor crisis when there was a lot of public opinion about what the Government should be doing, we were fielding faxes and phone calls coming in non-stop and there was a man asking quite firmly to speak to the minister. I thought I was doing a great job diplomatically refusing to allow him to talk to the Minister and then he said, 'look it's John Howard here'.

"The skills and lessons gave me confidence that there could be other roles outside of what I thought I could do and it's helped me to start my own business, it gave me the confidence to try things I would have otherwise thought were unachievable."

"He'd called on the main line, which he never used because we had a set phone line he called which went to the Minister's office directly or otherwise one of his advisors would call, but I thought, wait a minute, I'd better check with someone else and I put him on hold. It did end up being the Prime Minister!"

SERVING IT TO POLITICAL SUPERSTARS

Sonja says it wasn't all tough political matters, and in fact she was often called on to play sport with visiting dignitaries.



Sonja Firth, seated far left, with the Minister and colleagues

"The Minister quite liked tennis and so when visiting dignitaries came he liked to have a social game and a colleague and I would play against the Minister, or the visiting ambassador. About once a week I'd get a call and be asked to play tennis."

She says on a day-to-day basis, despite the 'top-secret' security clearance she had to get for the job, which meant her, and her family and friends were door stopped and interviewed at any given time - the job was relatively normal.

"I managed correspondence and made sure the Minister knew what he was signing and that things were happening as they should. Internet was relatively new and I could navigate it so I'd find out things for the Minister, like the cricket score - he was a mad cricket fan so during summer it was one of my roles to make sure he was across what was happening."

She says of Downer, who was the longest-serving Foreign Minister in Australian history, and is now Australian High Commissioner to the UK.

"He was really good to work with and I took away a lot from it. I was so apprehensive because all I had seen was what the media portrayed of him, but working for him he was the most generous, lovely, relaxed man."

She says he had full trust in the team of EAs and even when they were under pressure, they all just got on with it and "he never made unreasonable demands".

LESSONS LEARNED

"The skills and lessons gave me confidence that there could be other roles outside of what I thought I could do and it's helped me to start my own business, it gave me the confidence to try things I would have otherwise thought were unachievable."

She says it's vital EAs don't underestimate what they can do and ensure they are across the business as a whole.

"I'll never forget when there was correspondence that came in one day and I needed to make a call on it and who answered it ... and when I first started I thought I wouldn't worry about knowing everything and now I feel like I should have gone into the role being aware of everything as a whole and it would have changed how I handled everything.

"It's the difference to those who do their job and those who don't just do their one small job, but be proactive and make suggestions, having the confidence and taking it further. That will change how you operate."

These days she's running her own business, Business Influencer, where she offers digital up skilling for SMEs, social media and LinkedIn training and provides face-to-face training and monthly mentoring for small groups.

And she's also still using those skills she learned years ago, as EA to the founder of Right Click Capital, Australia's leading investment firm. **■**