

# The soldier who helps train office workers

## The Big Interview

By Aled Thomas  
Echo Reporter

SOLDIER to novelist isn't exactly a well-worn career trajectory, but it's one that we're familiar enough with after the military and then literary exploits of Andy McNab and others.

But not so much when the former soldier turned novelist is also a coach and personal development teacher to high-flying professionals.

Throw in the fact that the soldier/novelist/coach is a woman, and then add the fact that our soldier/novelist/coach has also been an Oxford theology graduate and RE teacher, and we're talking about one of the more varied careers we've ever heard about.

Louisa Clarke, who now lives and works in Cheltenham, can lay claim to this career.

We meet on the publication of her first novel *Callsign Whiskey*, which is a fictional retelling of the things she experienced while serving for 10 years as an officer in the Intelligence Corps.

That decade of service included tours to Afghanistan and Northern Ireland.

Speaking over a coffee (or more accurately a chai latte in Louisa's case) she says: "I chose to do it as fiction to avoid libel issues. One peer wrote a book about being an Apache pilot under pseudonym, but I wanted to do it as fiction.

"People find it a novelty meeting a woman who was in the Army and there's a mystique of intelligence.

"It was also cathartic, often you have experiences you can't process at the time - I had some very important and moving experiences with some amazing people which I think warranted being captured.

"The Army can sometimes be idealised as being a bastion of old-fashioned virtue.

"Sometimes it embodies that and Sandhurst works hard to do that and it's very successful. But the Army is like any other organisation - the constituents of its parts make it greater or flawed.

"It gets a lot of scrutiny in the press, and there are some great things people do and

some less appealing things people do."

Louisa is clearly proud of her 10 years as an officer - but she's also pretty clear-eyed about what the Army does well and what it does less well. She's in no way what you might call 'Army barmy'.

When it emerges that prior to signing up as a soldier she was an RE teacher I'm really intrigued at that - it seems like one hell of a gear change.

Louisa says: "I was complete military virgin. I had been to Oxford to study theology. I'd lived abroad in Milan and Florence and travelled around South East Asia.

"Training as a teacher of theology or RE, I really didn't have patience to retrain to what I'd have really liked to have done which would have been history or English.

"I was a bit bored and frustrated. I taught at a special measures school in North London, which was quite challenging, then a boys' school in Didcot. Someone suggested the Army; I was like 'Why would I do that?' I had never even considered it.

"I went and did officer selection, got the green card, went back to school and resigned. Within a month I was driving to Sandhurst. I had to ask my parents for a lift because my car wasn't big enough for the ironing board.

"If I'd have known how hard it was going to be, I'd have had second thoughts."

Many of us will have seen documentary series about soldiers training, and Louisa confirms they are as hard, physically demanding and mentally and emotionally draining as they seem.

But she adds: "But there were some amazing experiences. When you're tabbing along in Wales and it's pouring with rain, you've got your body weight on your back and

there's a guy walking along beside you who is twice your height, and you both look at each other, it creates a camaraderie. Faced with genuinely frighteningly exhausted, hungry, then you really find out what you're like.

"I found initially internally I'd whine. I found carrying weight crippling difficult, but when you go past a certain line, seeing discomfort of others became a source of motivation. As I became stronger, I'd help others.

"It became a mental strength which was amplified when it became a more cohesive team effort.

"One of the most rewarding experiences was when we were one of the first female platoons to ever win the log race - that was a seminal moment. It's one of the more arduously difficult experiences in the commissioning course."

After commissioning, Louisa deployed to Northern Ireland at a time when troops were still deployed there to gain experience of leading a platoon. (She says: "It gets quite fruity in the marching season.")

From there she became the head of the Intelligence cell of the Joint Allied Rapid Reaction Corps, now based at Innsworth, where it was stationed in Germany, and then in 2006 was sent to Afghanistan for six months.

She said: "The real Army is not like Sandhurst. As a platoon commander in Northern Ireland, there's 30 grizzly blokes and here I am, 'Private Benjamin' pitches up and they're all looking at me.

"But I had the most amazing platoon sergeant, we had the most fantastic and professional working relationship.

"It allowed us to create a really great team."

And even as a physically quite slight woman, Louisa



Louisa Clarke at her home in Cheltenham. Louisa is a former military intelligence officer and has

written a novel about her experiences including being deployed to Afghanistan

seems to have had little trouble in such a male and aggressive professional environment.

She says: "Operations and tours give a great opportunity to learn about yourself, and I wanted to show in the book that you don't have to compromise as a woman to operate in a male dominated environment.

"That men and women can work together, yet both sides can let the other side down, and to show strength of character can carry you through frightening situations.

"You don't have to be a guy to succeed, adopting characteristic, swearing all the time, being uber aggressive, being unkind or ridiculously competitive. That negates that there is a gender difference, because that difference is not a weakness. What the corps does is use that difference.

"There's a recognition that woman often have aptitude in analysis compared to a guy, that combination creates a

better outcome.

"When I see women become bloke-ish, they don't win any more respect and it's a shame because there's a lot of joy that can be brought to the equation.

"Out of uniform we can sit have a coffee, have a nice time, have a chat and a bit of banter, but equally you don't have to be all girly girl and be coy.

"The Army doesn't get it right all the time, but I've experienced sexism more in a commercial environment.

"If you do a good brief, you're good, if not you're not. It's not whether you're a woman or a man."

After leaving the Army in 2012, she worked for a while with a training and development company IDG but has more recently set up on her own as development coach.

Her company LA Clarke Development has already won clients such as Starbucks, Vodafone and Samworth Brothers, a food distribution group based in Bristol.

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What has she brought from her military experience that helps in her new role?

She says: "I talk to senior people and they might look at me and think: 'What have you been through that shows you understand stress?'" If I can say I've been in a war zone, had to be on patrol looking for explosive devices, then they might pay a bit more attention. It's like a calling card."

Otherwise, it seems Louisa's approach to helping people find the best in themselves doesn't seem to take much from what I naively think would be an Army-type approach (i.e. beast them round an assault course and make them polish their boots endlessly).

But she corrects me: "I like to think I'm breaking that stereotype. The supposition is that if you're military, then you're rigid in your thinking, and it's not like that. You're encouraged to be flexible and lateral. The saying 'no plan survives first contact with the

enemy' demands flexibility.

"My approach is coaching-centric, but it's also neuroscientific. It's about how you think and how that affects your emotional state and neurology and physiology connected to that.

"It's not just the hackneyed emotional intelligence that gets trotted out on management courses.

"People can own their internal state and control it so it brings about a more effective behavioural outcome - I

think like this, it makes me feel anxious. If I feel anxious, I think anxiously. If I think anxiously, I feel anxious and so the cycle continues."

"It's about breaking that cycle."

Louisa applies that thinking to both her coaching and her writing.

She finishes the interview with: "The book wasn't done in a day but in bite-sized portions.

"Small things every day lead to big differences.

"Have self-belief, don't listen to the culture in the UK which I believe says it's acceptable to fail, and don't try.

"There's a huge amount of arrogance that says if you're new, you don't know. But if you know enough, you're old enough."

More details on Louisa's coaching business are available at [laclarkedevelopment.com](http://laclarkedevelopment.com) and her book *Callsign Whiskey* can be found at [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk)