



'TO BE A GOOD SOLDIER, I QUICKLY UNDERSTOOD THAT SHOWING EMOTION WAS REGARDED AS WEAKNESS,' SAYS GEMMA, SEEN HERE IN KOSOVO, 2000

'I COULD BE A GOOD ARMY OFFICER... OR A WOMAN'

When Gemma Morgan (left) joined the Army, she looked forward to serving her country with pride. But after struggling with a culture of 'toxic masculinity', she plummeted to rock bottom. She describes her battle back from the brink

They found me by the roadside, soaking wet, delirious and choking on my own vomit, so out of it I barely knew who I was. It was 2007, I was 33 and, outwardly at least, a poster girl for female achievement. A

happily married mother of two, I had notched up a stellar performance record as an Army officer, with six years of service, a foreign posting to Kosovo and a top-ranking officer award under my belt.

Yet behind this shiny surface I was a wreck. The Army had taught me I was capable of so much more than I believed – but my desperation to mould myself into the Army ideal had come at a huge cost.

Desperate to fit in, I had tried to crush my femininity. A slow dismantling of my identity which had been compounded by terrifying flashbacks and nightmares from the horrors I witnessed of the Balkan conflict.

Becoming a mother was like throwing a grenade into the mix. Instead of fulfilment, I felt lost and alienated. Haunted by what I →

saw as my failure to conform to society's expectations both as a soldier and a mother, I turned to vodka, Valium and sleeping pills until, finally, I hit rock bottom – a rock bottom that led me to that desolate roadside.

I'm lucky that I was found, and that with the help of therapy and the love of my family I was able to rebuild my life. But it is only now, aged 47, that I have truly realised quite how much my Army years – a relatively short period of my life – have defined me. It's taken me twice as long to make my peace with it, and to understand the extent to which I allowed the Army's culture of toxic masculinity to permeate my life.

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Growing up in a middle-class home in Surrey, my schoolgirl ambitions were sporting and musical. I captained the England under-18s lacrosse side and won a place to study sports science at Birmingham University, only to realise, three quarters of the way through my subsequent postgraduate teaching course, that it wasn't for me.

I had a friend who'd joined the Army and, spurred on by the poster campaign at the time which showed soldiers skiing and jumping out of planes, I decided to join her.

There was no doubt I was physically able, and I was also drawn to the Army promise of belonging and service, along with its seductive message of female empowerment: when I joined Sandhurst in January 1996 at the age of 22, my intake was one of the first to do the same training as the men.

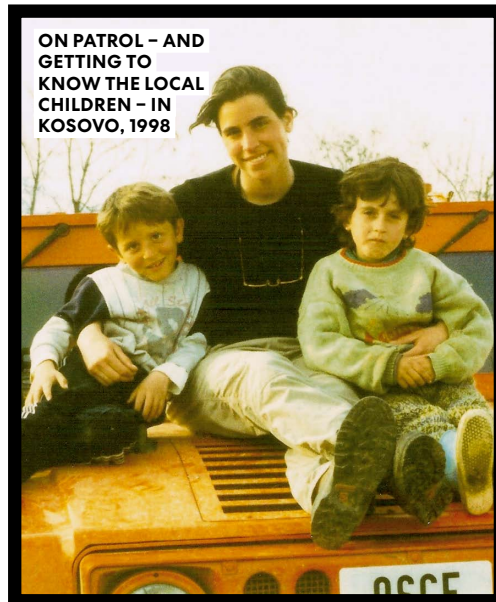
It was a steep learning curve, from the 5.30am starts – your bed already made with tight hospital corners – through to the brutal physical tests of endurance and strength. I quickly learned, too, that the reality of the Army's quest for gender equality meant moulding yourself to very masculine ideals – quite literally. When it came to the uniform, back then they still didn't make kit for women, which meant wearing men's combat boots and shirts that made no allowance for breasts.

Our collective idea of what makes a good soldier, meanwhile, remained based on traditional norms of masculinity, power and strength – and I quickly understood that displays of emotion were seen as weakness. I stopped wearing make-up, and even my speech turned more assertive and direct.

Unlike the men, the female recruits had to think constantly about their words and actions, treading a difficult middle ground in which you held your own, without threatening your colleagues' male pride. I remember finishing in the top rank in the Commandant's Individual Fitness Test, only to watch the men behind me publicly



RECEIVING THE CARMEN SWORD FROM HRH THE PRINCESS ROYAL, 1999



ON PATROL – AND GETTING TO KNOW THE LOCAL CHILDREN – IN KOSOVO, 1998

chastised for losing out to a woman. When I was weakened with a viral infection, my company sergeant major taunted me in front of the entire parade ground, mockingly suggesting I was pregnant.

There were other, more sinister behaviours: it was not uncommon for those of us sleeping in the women's accommodation to wake in the middle of the night to find a commissioned male officer standing over our beds, staring at us as we slept. He was reported, but no meaningful action was taken, reinforcing a message I had started to absorb from the earliest days, which was that such behaviour was part of the deal.

It meant that by the time I arrived at Dalton Barracks in Abingdon, Oxfordshire, for my first commissioned post as an officer in

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the Royal Logistic Corps (RLC), I had already accepted that uninvited groping and name-calling were considered a jovial part of Army life. But it didn't stop there: not long after I arrived at Dalton, I was sexually assaulted after a Christmas drinks party. A senior soldier pushed me into a small closet and lunged at my body before I managed to shoulder him out of the way and run.

Even then I didn't complain. Despite my disgust, I was also forced to look the other way when male officers would run scorecards with names of nightly conquests listed down the side and when soldiers would put hardcore pornography on their walls. Now, when I look back, I am amazed and horrified in equal measure at the extent I absorbed this as just something to be tolerated: like most of the other female officers, my tactic was to try to blithely ignore the sexist elements all around us.

That's not to say that I didn't thrive on the adrenaline and discipline. I was largely accepted as 'one of the lads', and physically I was always able to more than hold my own. But, often, it felt almost impossible to be a good Army officer and a woman

at the same time – something that was brutally underlined by the regimental colonel when I arrived at Deepcut Barracks. On my arrival in December 1999 he told me I could no longer have the officer recruitment role that I'd been assigned. He had decided that he did not want a woman being the face of the corps. To use his words precisely – I was the best person for the job but not the right person. Looking back, it was the beginning of the end.

Before then, however, I was deployed to Kosovo as part of a multinational force tasked with verifying human rights violations and monitoring the agreed withdrawal of Serbian forces.

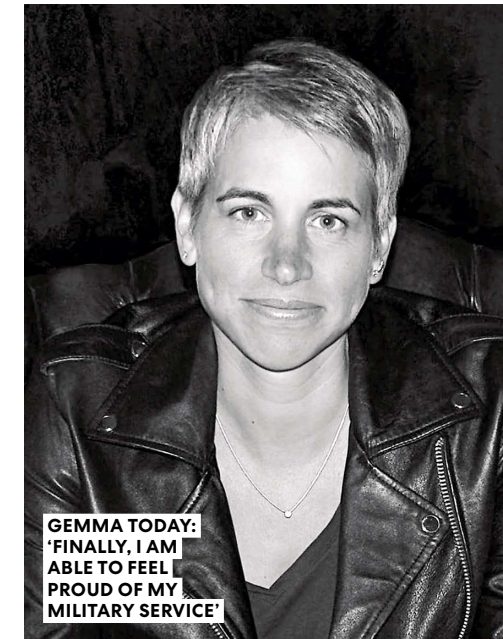
It was a transformative experience in which I witnessed the terrible unfolding of the unspeakable atrocities unleashed by this civil war – atrocities which quickly haunted my dreams. When I returned to base five months later, in March 1999, I was awarded the Carmen Sword, an award given to the best-achieving young RLC officer, but my surface pride was underpinned by an all-pervading horror at what I had left behind.

Yet in an environment where showing vulnerability was a weakness, I felt I had to conceal the flashbacks and nightmares that now unfolded daily. Numbly, I would go about my duties, then return to my room and lie curled up on my bed in the foetal position. When I wasn't doing that I was indulging in self-destructive behaviours, drinking too much, driving too fast – anything to escape the feelings inside me.

One night, lying in my room, I took an overdose, a cry for help which quickly became public knowledge when my medical notes were shared with the chain of command and the wider troops – a betrayal of confidentiality that shattered my credibility overnight. I was given counselling for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), although I was never officially diagnosed, something I now see as a deliberate avoidance of responsibility.

By then I had met my husband David, a fellow RLC officer – we married while still both serving officers in 2001 – and, although his presence had a stabilising effect, my mental health remained fragile, and never more so than following the birth of my daughter Beth in 2002. Fuelled by sleeplessness, with a newborn baby who wouldn't stop crying, my anxiety soared. I was baffled that a role that seemed to bring so much happiness to others had left me feeling so empty.

I loved my baby daughter, but I felt strangely detached from my life. I had given so much of myself to an Army that had left me feeling alienated, angry and deeply betrayed. It became increasingly obvious that I could not reconcile my feelings with



GEMMA TODAY: 'FINALLY, I AM ABLE TO FEEL PROUD OF MY MILITARY SERVICE'

my ongoing duties, and I left in late 2002 at the end of my maternity leave.

At first there was a sense of relief, quickly replaced by an inability to adjust to civilian life. It was so different to everything I knew. Everything the Army had taught me now felt too assertive and too competitive for the world outside, and particularly for motherhood. At coffee mornings with fellow mums I would sit, blankly, going through the motions while around me everyone chattered away about their babies.

I learned not to talk much about my own life – everything I had experienced was so far removed from the lives of anyone there. How could I explain that I woke every night at 2am, haunted by the same vision of a dead-eyed boy? That I slept with a weapon next to my bed because it made me more comfortable, and that when I was pushing Beth in her pram around our suburban town, I would, hyper-vigilant, clock each parked car and each person around me?

Even my doctor didn't understand, putting my issues down to postnatal depression and scrawling out a prescription for a stronger dose of antidepressants. It took until 2005 for me to receive a diagnosis of PTSD from a psychiatrist. But even then it made little difference, as most psychiatrists at the time had little knowledge of the specific

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trauma suffered by people who have left the military. My symptoms worsened, particularly after the birth of my son Tom in June 2006. By then I had long since stopped trying to fit in with the local mums, preferring instead to withdraw and self-medicate my way through the ongoing nightmares and flashbacks. After a Christmas where I barely slept and was unable to engage in even the most basic functions, David took the difficult decision to take me to a psychiatric unit. This would end up being a two-month stay, after which I was treated as an outpatient.

Even then my rock bottom was yet to come: struggling with their drug regime, which made me feel sick, and shaken by the fresh wave of trauma unleashed by their therapy, I arrived at the end of a bleak January day in despair. I had stopped wanting to try and all I wanted was to escape – the clinic, my feelings, my life. That moonless night in 2007 I fled, zigzagging round the property perimeter to avoid the security cameras before drinking myself into oblivion in the village pubs and wading into a nearby river.

The rest is a blur: I vaguely recall being scooped up from the roadside and put in an ambulance. I was lucky to be alive. It was a rock bottom which proved to be a turning point, a brush with death that forced me to confront the realisation that if I didn't find a way to move forward, then my two beautiful young children would be left without a mother. Focusing on them gave me a purpose and slowly, with the help of a stabilised drug regime and therapy, my health improved and I was permitted to go home on weekend leave.

I remember the warm hugs and kisses from five-year-old Beth as she asked if Mummy would be home from work for longer this time, and the change that just a few weeks had rendered in my baby son, now seven months old.

Finally, after two months at the unit, I was able to return home for good. And four years later I was blessed with another son, James, now nine. He is one of so many blessings – not just my children, but my incredible husband, who has unwaveringly stood by me throughout. It has not been easy for either of us, and managing my mental health is a daily challenge. But finally, I am able to feel proud of my military service, and of serving alongside some remarkable women and men.

My greatest hope for those women who have come after me is that they have been able to find that same sense of pride without losing who they truly are.

Gemma Morgan is now a keynote speaker. For more information, visit morganeight.com