

‘Abuse was the norm in the army. I wasn’t cared for, but cast out’

Gemma Morgan joined up at 22, an award-winning young officer with a bright future. But the army’s culture of misogyny and sexual harassment, coupled with unacknowledged PTSD, would push her to the brink of suicide

Larisa Brown

Propped against the wall inside Gemma Morgan’s living room in the Herefordshire countryside is the beautifully etched Carmen Sword she was awarded as the best ranked young officer in the Royal Logistic Corps. Back in 1999 she was the first woman to win the sword and it was handed over to her at a ceremony by the Princess Royal. To those that didn’t know her well, she was the middle-class girl from Surrey turned poster girl for the British Army and she had everything going for her.

In reality, she was doped up to the eyeballs with a dangerous cocktail of Valium, sleeping pills, antidepressants and vodka —



Gemma Morgan, 50, at home in Herefordshire: “The army is a brotherhood that protects itself”

TOM JACKSON FOR THE TIMES MAGAZINE

anything she could get her hands on to escape and numb the pain.

Being in the army had ruined her, with the misogyny, sexual abuse and toxic masculinity, as she describes it, being all too much to bear.

We are speaking now, decades later, as she has decided to turn the diary she made as part of therapy at the Priory, the prestigious mental

health hospital often used by the rich and famous, into a book, *Pink Camouflage*. Her motivation? To inspire other women in the armed forces to seek help and force the army to change its culture and behaviour.

“I read what was happening to women in the armed forces today and I felt a duty to speak out. I want

to be able to offer hope to people suffering who are still in it. You can put it all back together and come out the other end,” she explains.

Morgan, who is now 50 and happily married with three children, Beth, 21, Tom, 17, and James, 12, is referring to a [report by Sarah Atherton MP](#), who in her role as a member of the defence select committee exposed a culture of institutional misogyny in the military despite repeated promises of reform. Atherton, who left school at 16 and signed up for the army, serving in the Intelligence Corps, was on to something. Her inquiry received 4,000 written testimonies from female service personnel and veterans, who came forward to allege bullying, harassment, discrimination, sexual abuse and rape. Ben Wallace, the defence secretary at the time, took the unusual decision to lift restrictions that would have blocked the female service personnel from participating.

“The weight of evidence... is compelling,” Atherton said at the time. As if to illustrate the problem further, one veteran told me at a drinks event recently that Atherton could never chair the committee herself because “she only knows about women”.

The [military #MeToo movement](#)

continued under the brief leadership of Tory MP Robert Courts, who held a follow-up session late last year because of the huge response to the initial inquiry. Another 50 whistleblowers came forward within weeks, with one woman saying she was groped and called a “thick f***ing bitch” for making an error while on duty. Another said that she had “undergone nearly 18 months of feeling bullied, discriminated against and harassed, which has resulted in a decline in my health” as she waited to hear the outcome of a complaint she had lodged. A senior officer even threatened her with legal action if she mentioned her complaint again.

“The accounts of sexual assault and the cultural normalisation of sexual harassment are particularly disturbing and are difficult reading,” Courts said after we met briefly in parliament before Christmas.

Morgan was particularly appalled when she heard about [Olivia Perks](#), a 21-year-old “positive and bubbly” officer cadet who killed herself at Sandhurst in 2019. A coroner found she had fallen victim to a “complete breakdown in welfare support” during her time at the academy. Five days before her death, she was caught leaving an officer’s room after a ball and although both denied any sexual activity had taken place, an



In Kosovo, 2001. Morgan would be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder following the deployment

COURTESY OF GEMMA MORGAN

inquest heard how Perks felt like she was “on trial” over the incident.

Morgan’s own story has similarities with other accounts raised during the committee inquiry. She joined the army in 1996 when she was 22, having dropped out of a postgraduate teacher-training course and been seduced by Sandhurst’s message of female empowerment. “I was drawn by the promise of belonging and the idea of service. I joined up, as many of us did, believing the army would offer a career with value and meaning,” she says. The first cohort of women to be

trained alongside men had entered Sandhurst just four years earlier. Until 1990, being pregnant in the army had been a sackable offence.

Once Morgan signed up, beatings and repetitive physical exercises were dished out as punishment, and reporting an injury was considered a mark of shame. “You would quickly be labelled ‘sick, lame and lazy’ and cast aside. Bright pink ibuprofen tablets were dished out daily as the answer to every ailment or injury. We were told to ‘suck it up’. ‘No pain, no gain,’ was the favourite rallying cry,” she explains.

In one fitness test, where cadets had to run eight miles carrying full kit and weapons, followed by an assault course, Morgan finished in the top third. She was congratulated, but the men behind her were publicly shamed as their names were written in white chalk on the blackboard. “As a woman, you were damned if you did and damned if you did not. I quickly learnt to excel, but not too far, for fear of stepping over the line. I learnt how to make myself smaller as I walked into a room in order to survive,” she recounts.

During the first term at Sandhurst, Morgan kept feeling lightheaded and faint to the point that one night she had to stay in the medical centre.

Blood tests showed an elevated white blood cell count. On her first day back on parade, the sergeant major asked if “congratulations” were in order and whether he needed to knit blue or pink for the imminent arrival. When she mentioned the incident to a superior, she was warned to “wind my neck in”.

Uninvited groping, as Morgan puts it, was commonplace at the bar or under the table at formal dinners. “Groups of men would run scorecards with names of nightly conquests listed down the side; the points for a young female officer were some of the highest you could win,” she says.

One officer’s favourite party trick was to “weigh” a female’s breasts by leaning in to push his cheeks against their cleavage. “It was all just accepted as ‘banter’ — a jovial part of army life in which boys would be boys. For all the talk about discipline and integrity, so many issues were either ignored or brushed away. At Sandhurst, the instructors had slept with other instructors, as well as cadets. You could call it fraternisation, but it was also an abuse of authority,” she says.

In one disturbing and yet repeated incident, she recounts how a male officer would let himself into the

females' rooms at night, with the cadets waking up to find him standing over their beds in the dark. Although a complaint was raised, no meaningful action was ever taken. "It was lesson number one in military life," says Morgan, as it was commonly believed that complaints were swept under the carpet.

At another base later on in her career, Morgan says soldiers mounted hardcore pornography all over their walls before they had a room inspection. Other officers walked on by, but when Morgan asked for it to be removed, she was laughed at and branded "frigid and uptight".

During a brief relationship she had at Sandhurst she was in the man's bedroom when she looked up to see his friends watching through the panel of glass above the door. "That was the culture — they would tell their male friends so they could come and watch," she says. There was one captain who would boast about positioning women facing away from the door so his friends could come in during the act, without her knowledge, and take photos.

"They lived by a pack mentality. Abuse was the norm and therefore accepted. It was wearing and degrading — the only way to cope



Gemma Morgan interviewed in The Times before leaving for Kosovo

was to let it all wash over me. It was fast becoming a fact of life," she writes in her book. When Morgan tried to drink soft drinks at the bar, she was instructed to "man up". They were never allowed to leave the bar early.

In 1998 Morgan was deployed to Kosovo as part of a peacekeeping force. Prior to the deployment Morgan, then a lieutenant, gave an interview to The Times. "There has never been an operation like this before. It was done by the military in Bosnia, but we are going as

non-military observers," she said, full of excited anticipation about her first overseas deployment. She admitted her parents were not entirely happy. On tour she witnessed the aftermath of an ambush in which three people were killed. A man's knee was blown apart and the raw bone protruded through the severed ligaments, like a joint of meat. What she saw on February 4, 1999, stayed with her for years afterwards. Morgan would later be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, although the army would

never admit it.

After she returned from Kosovo she was socialising one evening when a married officer grabbed her hand and led her to his house to get another drink. Once inside he led her upstairs and into his marital bed next to a nursery with a cot. "He started to unbutton my trousers and undress me. Struggling to stand, I did nothing to stop him. Drifting in and out of consciousness, I let it happen. I lay still, fixing my eyes beyond him and onto the ceiling. My body betrayed me. I pulled on my trousers, stuffing my underwear into my pocket and left saying nothing," she explains, having never come to terms with the fact she may have been raped.

One morning after the incident she returned from lunch to find an image of her face superimposed on a naked porn star's body and stuck up all over the building. At formal dinners, pranks were the main entertainment and Morgan was considered "fair game".

"There is this toxic culture where you have to fit in. If you don't fit in, you are not safe," she says, explaining how both her experience in Kosovo and her treatment in the military pushed her into an increasingly dangerous state of mind. But there was no help.

“I wasn’t cared for; I was just cast out. You didn’t share that you were struggling mentally. It was like you were a leper.” Morgan resorted to sleeping pills and alcohol, finding herself waking with a splitting headache and unable to concentrate. She became angry and resentful of everyone around her. And yet the harassment never stopped.

Even after Morgan got married in the early 2000s, her male peers still treated her appallingly. On a deployment overseas, a male officer created imaginary “sexual scenarios” for Morgan to respond to as a form of entertainment. He became more physical in the officers’ mess in the evenings and Morgan would have to lock herself in the bathroom. The same individual made her feel degraded and humiliated as he took “live verbal odds” on whether he would have sex with her that evening. The officer’s soldiers simulated riding rodeo when she turned up for parade one morning. “It was persistent and seemingly endless. It completely undermined me,” she describes.

When she became pregnant, Morgan’s commanding officer asked if it was planned or a mistake. After that, she could no longer fit in her uniform, so had to wear ordinary clothes. She was passed over for job



“You didn’t share you were struggling mentally”

TOM JACKSON FOR THE TIMES MAGAZINE. MAKE-UP: JULIE...

interviews and no longer invited out with her peers. When she thought life wouldn’t get any better, she took an overdose.

“I wouldn’t describe it as a deliberate attempt to die. I just couldn’t cope with living any more.” Gossip spread through the base about the overdose and the shame and desperation ate away at her self-worth, destroying what little dignity she believed she had left. As she sought to leave, medics failed to diagnose her with PTSD, which meant she was not eligible for medical discharge or compensation — something which she saw as the “ultimate betrayal”.

Morgan went on to have three children with an adoring husband, David, also a serving officer, but

initially struggled to cope with life on the outside. Sometimes she would drink a bottle of vodka on the street instead of going home. David ended up giving up his career to look after her.

After years of therapy, she is back to enjoying life and works as a leadership consultant and motivational speaker. When she reads stories of female military personnel being harassed or bullied and complaints being ignored, it galvanises her to talk about her experiences further.

Of course, the army is hopeful that the way Morgan was treated in the Nineties is not reflective of how women in the armed forces are treated today. This is “an army that hopefully doesn’t exist any more”, says a military source when asked about Morgan’s experience. He points to a new My Complaint app which makes it easy for personnel to raise complaints if they feel they have experienced unacceptable behaviour. Complaints of bullying, harassment and discrimination are dealt with by someone outside an individual’s chain of command. “So much effort is being applied to make sure everyone feels safe,” the army source adds, referring to two decades of transformation that has seen women promoted to some of

the most senior roles in the service. Lieutenant General Dame Sharon Nesmith, who was commissioned into the Royal Corps of Signals in 1992, is now deputy chief of the general staff, the second highest position in the army.

Yet Morgan remains unconvinced. “Little has changed. It is still the same brotherhood that is protecting itself and marking its own homework,” she adds, determined that by using her voice she will force the military to do better.

***Pink Camouflage* by Gemma Morgan (Luath Press, £12.99) is published on March 1. For more information go to gemma-morgan.com. To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk. Free UK standard P&P on orders over £25. Special discount for Times+ members ■**