



Déjà vu

The terror attacks of 7/7 took Anne back to her days as a cult member



# 'I escaped a terrorist cult'

Anne Singleton can't forget the years she spent in the clutches of extremists...

When I switched on the TV and saw the suicide message of one of the London bombers, a chill went down my spine. It was like déjà vu. I recognised the young man's language and behaviour, because there was a time when that could have been me. I too was once prepared to give up my life for a terrorist cell.

Growing up in Leeds in the 1970s, life was ordinary and uneventful, but I wanted to change the world for the better. At university, I started going to meetings of a group called the People's Mujaheddin, who were fighting to overthrow the Ayatollah in Iran.

I had an Iranian boyfriend at the time and was swept away by the romantic idea of righting wrongs. The leaders inspired me with their talk of sacrificing all to help their people – and the idea of having

a purpose in life was very seductive.

It took 10 years of mind games, peer pressure and manipulation before I totally submitted to the group. My boyfriend had seen sense and left, but I was more gullible. They flattered me and made me feel trusted, then guilt-tripped me into working for them.

My parents and friends couldn't understand why an ordinary 20-something was so involved in this cause. So, as the group began to dominate my life, I revealed less and less about myself.

I took two weeks off work to go on hunger strike to raise publicity for 'the cause.' By day three I was so high from not eating or sleeping that I was delirious and in no fit state to make any important

decisions – but that's exactly when I decided to devote my whole life to the organisation. I left my job and sold my flat and car to live with the group full-time. I felt I belonged, I was trusted.

Every aspect of our lives was controlled, right down to the clothes we wore. I had no money and freely handed over my passport because I was under their spell. For two-and-a-half years I'd sit in a small room all day, monitoring the media for mentions of our group and sending out propaganda.

Then I was sent to Iraq for military training. Getting a uniform was a real highlight. Only the very dedicated got to join the army. I was like a child with no responsibility, running assault courses, learning to shoot and driving trucks – it was a million miles away from the life I'd grown up in.

Even though I never got to actually fight, I'd have gone into battle in the name of the cause if I'd been asked. I

*'I was sent to Iraq for training'*



Anne today, at home with husband Massoud and their son Barbak



**Young idealist**  
'At university I was swept along by the idea of righting wrongs'

forbidden and that all couples would have to divorce that my faith in the group started to go. By this point I was hardly eating. I was burnt out and couldn't cope any more. But leaving the group would have meant I'd failed, and it was hard to simply walk out. So I started to get jobs and make friends outside the organisation. That way I got a taste of the life I'd missed – and I wanted it back.

It took a further three years before I felt strong enough to leave for good. After nearly 20 years of being brainwashed, I'd finally seen my comrades for what they were – an exploitative group of terrorists.

I came to London to meet a friend who'd also escaped the group. Massoud became a kindred spirit and soon we fell in love. That summer we got married and at last we could live like normal people.

Freedom felt amazing, but repairing the rift with my family was hard. Although I knew I'd been brainwashed and wasn't really responsible for what I'd done, I needed to know they still loved me.

Luckily my parents did forgive me, and



**In uniform**

'Getting military uniform was a highlight. I'd have gone into battle'

surviving this experience has brought us closer together.

When my son Barbak was born in 2000, they were delighted to have a grandchild.

Massoud and I have been doing some research into terrorist cells and we've realised the group had indoctrinated us using the same techniques that cults do.

We both felt a huge resentment and anger, but then we focused our energy on helping others trapped in the organisation. We started a website to expose the group and to help victims caught up in terrorist cells.

When I look back it horrifies me to think an intelligent young woman like me could be so completely sucked in. I believed I was acting of my own free will, but I see now that I wasn't in control of my thoughts or feelings at all. I was just overawed by this group of people.

Sometimes I get flashbacks of my terrorist days, but we're a normal family now. My husband works and I stay at home looking after our son and managing the website. Hopefully others can gain something positive from everything I've been through.

**Terror targets: the young and vulnerable**

Dr Elie Godsi's book *Making Sense Of Madness And Badness*, explains that terrorist groups target youngsters who want to help fight injustice, and people who become terrorists aren't mentally abnormal, they're more the victims of manipulation.

Young women are targeted because they're less likely to be suspected, and therefore more valuable to terror organisations.



know it sounds incredible. It was the ultimate act of submission and I didn't dwell on the fact that I'd probably die, like most of my fellow soldiers did.

Back home, no one knew what I was up to until I visited my family at Christmas. Although I'd hardly contacted my parents, my mother had never stopped writing to me. Her letters were full of mundane details – I didn't think much at the time, but I realise now those letters were a bridge to my past, and a lifeline for me.

I hadn't totally forgotten the person I once was – I'd always imagined one day I'd get married and have kids. It was when the leader announced that marriage was