I’ve always fancied interrogating a spy, and who better to start with than Dame Stella Rimington, probably our most famous ex-spook.

Rimington became the first female director general of MI5 in 1992 and the first DG to be named publicly. It caused a publicity maelstrom that changed her life forever and, indeed, her branch of the Secret Service as she embarked on a strategy of openness with the media.

She quit MI5 in 1996 after 27 years service and since then has served on the boards of various major companies, including M&S, and she sparked widespread controversy with her autobiography in 2001. More recently she has become a thriller writer. Her first novel was At Risk and the next instalment in the series, which follows — you guessed it — a British female spy, is out soon. Rimington also works the speech circuit and is a burgeoning high-end mentor to rising corporate executives.

She has two daughters in their 30s and two grand children, aged seven and nine months. Although not divorced, she separated from her husband of 20 years in the 1980s.

We talk in her editor’s office at Random House, a short surveillance operation away from her old Thames House HQ in central London. On sight, Rimington is a typically demure granny, in a neat cream jacket with a sparkly broach, black trousers and a pretty, pale green Italian Renaissance print top. But she is as cool and switched on as any 71-year-old you are ever likely to meet.

Rimington talks crisply, with precision, while maintaining an assured stillness in her body language. She exhibits no tells and, as you would expect, deftly neuters awkward questions, but she can chuckle warmly at her blatant caniness. Well, at least the best anti-interrogation training money can buy was not wasted.

“The villain in your new novel is motivated because his father was a journalist who was ruined after being deliberately misled on stories by the security services. So, do the secret services misinform the press to their own ends?”

Of course it doesn’t, no. People might expect that, but they would be wrong. It is quite an easy assumption that what I am writing about must be specific incidents. But it is all based on the generality of my experience, not on incidents.

When I became director general, we decided to be more open with the press and we actually sat down and thought very carefully about how we were going to do it. One of the things we said to ourselves was that if we are going to engage at all with the media, we must make sure they understand that we are not going to mislead them. Basically, there will be a lot of things we won’t say, but if we do say anything, what we are going to say is going to be the facts. We are not going to get involved in misleading them. It’s obvious to anybody with half a wit that that is not the way.

All these years on, would you say your strategy has worked out well?

I think it has panned out reasonably well. The headlines are not as they used to be. We used to say to ourselves that some newspapers have a headline ready made up and it was either “MI5 Blunders” or James Bond-type stories. We did not engage with the press at all, so that was the nature of the relationship. Part of our thinking behind the move to openness was, Let’s try and get rid of the MI5 blunders thing and James Bond, and let people see what kind of service this is and what job it has to do in a democracy.

Can you talk me through what it was like being thrust into the media spotlight.

My experience of the media was actually quite traumatic. I moved from being completely unknown, working in a secret organisation, living in an ordinary London street where nobody knew what I did, to being the only face that anybody knew of British Intelligence. It was an enormous shock to me and to my family, particularly, who were totally unprepared. And it was a shock for the Service as well, who were also totally unprepared. We had to run quite
FANTASY FLYERS
Stella Rimington’s
Kim Philby — but only if he was prepared
What question would you ask?
Who would you most like to interview?
about: “Superb Novel From Stella
about myself — but maybe that is unwise
involving yourself?
What would be the Fantasy Headline
at work.
to typify a tabloid approach to a woman succeeding
they thought she belonged: in the kitchen. It seemed
found a woman in a man’s job, to get her back where
instinct of the tabloid press, when they suddenly
is the one I would wipe away. It was the whole
collection of headlines. I think “Housewife Superspy”
Of Two Gets Tough With Terrorists” was another.
One I didn’t like was “Housewife Superspy”. “Mother
headlines would you erase from the cuttings?
What were the worst bits for you and which
— which was a strange result of being more open.
one newspaper published a photo of our house we
immediately posed a threat to us, which is why when
I knew anything about it. There wasn’t any press
media suddenly had this announcement about this
woman in a job that was — at least the tabloid’s
thought — an archetypal male job. And they had
no photograph. I knew that that was a classic disaster
situation, so obviously, they immediately tried to find
out who I was. It was at a time when the IRA was
very active on the streets of London, so to have got
immediately posed a threat to us, which is why when
one newspaper published a photo of our house we
had to move very quickly and, ultimately, live covertly
— which was a strange result of being more open.

What were the worst bits for you and which headlines would you erase from the cuttings?
One didn’t like was “Housewife Superspy”. “Mother Of Two Gets Tough With Terrorists” was another. “M5 Boss In Secret Love Split” — there is a whole collection of headlines. I think “Housewife Superspy” is the one I would wipe away. It was the whole
instructor of the tabloid press, when they suddenly
found a woman in a man’s job, to get her back where
they thought she belonged in the kitchen. It seemed
to typify a tabloid approach to a woman succeeding
at work.

Also, just as I became director general, the Security Service took over intelligence gathering against the IRA and there was a whole series of articles about how I was a hard-faced negotiator who
had wrestled this responsibility out by immensely
clever negotiation and ruthless what-not. They
portrayed me as this Mack the Knife kind of person, or like Rosa Klebb [villain in James Bond’s
From Russia With Love] with knives in her boots. And
there were various extremely fierce photographs of this
terribly hard-faced woman. All that stuff was
absolute rubbish and was so irritating and annoying.

But you must have been ruthless to head M5.
Surely, you are a tough cookie?
Well, it depends what you mean by a tough cookie. I don’t think I am ruthless. [Pause]. Well, I suppose,
ultimately I am ruthless in a way because, if you are
going to achieve anything, you have got to be
ruthless on occasion. But I have always taken a view
that it is easier to achieve your objective by charm,
than overt ruthlessness, so I wouldn’t characterise
myself as being a tough cookie.

As part of the open media strategy, you invited various national newspaper editors to lunch.
What was that like and who did you meet?
We invited a few journalists and editors with journals and I think they were as wary of us as we were of them.
I can’t remember who we invited quite frankly, but probably all the editors of the broadsheets and the
main tabloids. As far as I can remember, The Sun was
the only newspaper that turned down our invitation. — Kelvin MacKenzie was the editor. We got the
answer back, “He doesn’t go out to lunch” and we
sort of laughed and said to ourselves, He is afraid we
are going to brainwash him or tell him more than
he wants to know.

We were not disappointed by that. We were quite satisfied that we were getting through to the
newspapers with whom we felt we could have a
sensible conversation with. Our objective was not
to seduce these guys, but to put more information
into the public domain. We never thought we
were going to get a good press, but what we wanted was
a greater understanding of what the issues were, so
that we could be judged in a more sensible context.
I think it worked, but you are never going to
be able to control the press, and that is not the
objective at all.

Have you ever tried to recruit a journalist?
No, You mean as an agent? No, no, no, no.
That would not be something I would immediately think
was a sensible thing to do. The answer to that
question is no — we never asked it.

Well, can I ask it in a different way? Do you
know of any journalist who was recruited, even if you didn’t actually do it yourself?
No, I am not, no. And I have never recruited a
journalist as a covert source. Sorry about that!

INTERVIEW
by Rob McGibbon

Shame, I think a lot of journalists reckon they have the perfect cover and abilities to be a spy. No, I am not, no. And I have never recruited a journalist as a covert source. Sorry about that!

What is the security position for you these days?
Even though you are famous, do you give
a cover story if you meet someone casually
to which would you never answer?
What did you think of the media frenzy over
the current terrorism situation?

That whole farce was, in my opinion — and it is quite an informed opinion — stirred up by people
in the Ministry of Defence who somehow saw my
publishing an autobiography as equating to their
attempts to stop SAS soldiers writing about operations and methods. It was they who put the
manuscript of my autobiography, which I had
submitted for clearance, in a brown envelope and
sent it to The Sun. But there was a complete misconception that I was going to start
revealing the nation’s secrets. Having protected them
for 27 years why was I going to do that? It was kept
on by the press as a great story and I understand that.

Do you think M15 are doing a good job given
the current terrorism situation?
Yeah, I think they are. The thing about working in
M15 is that their successes are never seen and their
failures obviously are. And there will always be
failures, but I am quite sure they are doing an
excellent job in looking after us.

Do you hanker to be involved in that world again?
Not now, no. I have been there and done that.
I wouldn’t want to go back to either the pressure
or to the restrictions on one’s life.

I like to think that I am regarded as something
other than the former head of M15. I mean, it is 10 years ago that I left and I have done
lots of other things since then. My constant hope is
that I am filling in, so that there is something else
that I represent rather than just what I was.

A longer version of this interview can be read at
www.robmcgibbon.com