

the press conference with ANDY MCNAB

Andy McNab is the SAS hero who shot to fame with his book *Bravo Two Zero*, which recounted the elite troop's horror after being caught in Iraq during the first Gulf war. He endured six weeks of torture in the now notorious Abu Ghraib prison, but survived to collect the Distinguished Conduct Medal — an award second only to the Victoria Cross. This was added to the Military Medal he received for courage as an ordinary soldier in Northern Ireland when he was 20. *Bravo* has sold more than five million copies and McNab has since become Britain's biggest selling thriller writer, with total sales of about 16 million worldwide. He is about to publish his eighth novel. Now 45, McNab is a multimillionaire and has a parallel writing career as a freelance journalist, penning expert war and terrorism articles for newspapers. We meet at his private members' club in Paddington and it is fascinating to see the lights come up on the silhouette that is his public image. He is only 5ft 10in, yet stocky as hell. The handshake is no bone cruncher and the eyes are a kind light blue. He is laddishly friendly and has an unexpectedly quiet voice that is distinctly South London. But whatever his appearance — and even though I know it's a bit crass — I can't help thinking: **This man has killed!**

Andy, war hero and now a seriously best-selling author. Not bad going?

Yeah, it's pretty good, isn't it? The army was all I knew for years, so to get this whole new life as a writer is a bonus I wasn't expecting.

Can you talk me through your writing routine and the schedule for the books?

Generally I have a book out every November. While I'm doing promotion, I start thinking about the next one and begin with a treatment of no more than 15 pages, with the basic plot, locations and key scenes. I get this done by about Christmas. In January I get stuck in and by mid-March I will have the first draft done. Most of it will be crap, with big chunks missing, but it's always easier to work on something when you have words down, rather than in your head.

When you are in the flow, what represents a good day or a bad day, in terms of words?

On a good day, I will do 15,000...

Fifteen THOUSAND! That's incredible. What are you doing — copying out the phone book?

I just crash it out in the beginning. A really bad day is 2,000 words. I'm not one for all that hand-on-the-brow angst writer stuff. You're not sweeping roads or digging holes. The job is all right, so I just get it

done. I have always been like that with everything. Maybe it's from my army discipline — you're not taught to sit around agonising.

When I started writing, the publisher told me about an author — it was either Joanna Trollope or Terry Pratchett — who works from 10am-4pm every day, with no interruptions. I followed that and I don't go near email or the phone between those times. If I'm stuck, I leave a gap and get on with the next bit. A lot of the first draft goes in the bin and I end up with about 90,000 words. All my books are about 120,000 words, so by about April time, I panic. I then do research trips and start to find the texture — the local beers, what hotel rooms look like and the weapons. My books are quite modular, like a template, and they all need certain things. My deadline is in June, but I usually deliver it by the second week of July.

***Bravo Two Zero* gave you a new life. How did that book come about?**

After the Gulf war, I went back into the Regiment and did three more years. I was going to bum around Australia for a year when I left, but then I saw John

Nichol's book *Tornado Down*. He put me in touch with an agent and I got a deal. I found writing *Bravo* quite easy because I had done so many debriefs and lectures on what happened to other soldiers. I got the advance, paid off my mortgage and thought about doing security work. Only then did the publisher ask if I wanted to do a second book. "Are you joking — of course I do!" Then I did *Immediate Action* and that sold even more than *Bravo*.

It must have been quite a transition, from the military to publishing?

It was quite funny because when *Bravo* started, the publishers would sit in on publicity interviews. I always got asked about killing people and I kept putting my foot in my mouth and saying, "Oh, I didn't think about it much, I just got on with it." It was a nightmare because afterwards the publishers were all jumpy and going, "Oh, no, no, you can't say things like that! You must establish the context and moral conflict." And I was, like, "You what?"

They sent me for two days of media training in Soho, where I got annihilated in pretend interviews

