

Being an animal lover, there's naturally a tale behind how Jacqui Thompson's four pets, Rocky, a boerbul cross, Jesse who looks like she's got a bit of boxer in her, the smallest mutt Alex, who not even the vet will guess at and the cat Patch, came to stay. Although that's another story, it shows how sometimes when you meet one of those truly stylish and sophisticated people, they have a warmth and compassion that comes from caring deeply about life and the beings around them. Jacqui had a somewhat unusual upbringing and after her parents' divorce when she was six-years-old, she moved between the then Rhodesia, South Africa, Ireland and Spain, while living in a host of other places in-between. 'I think the longest we stayed anywhere was for five years. I lived for six months with one parent and six months with the other,' she explains.

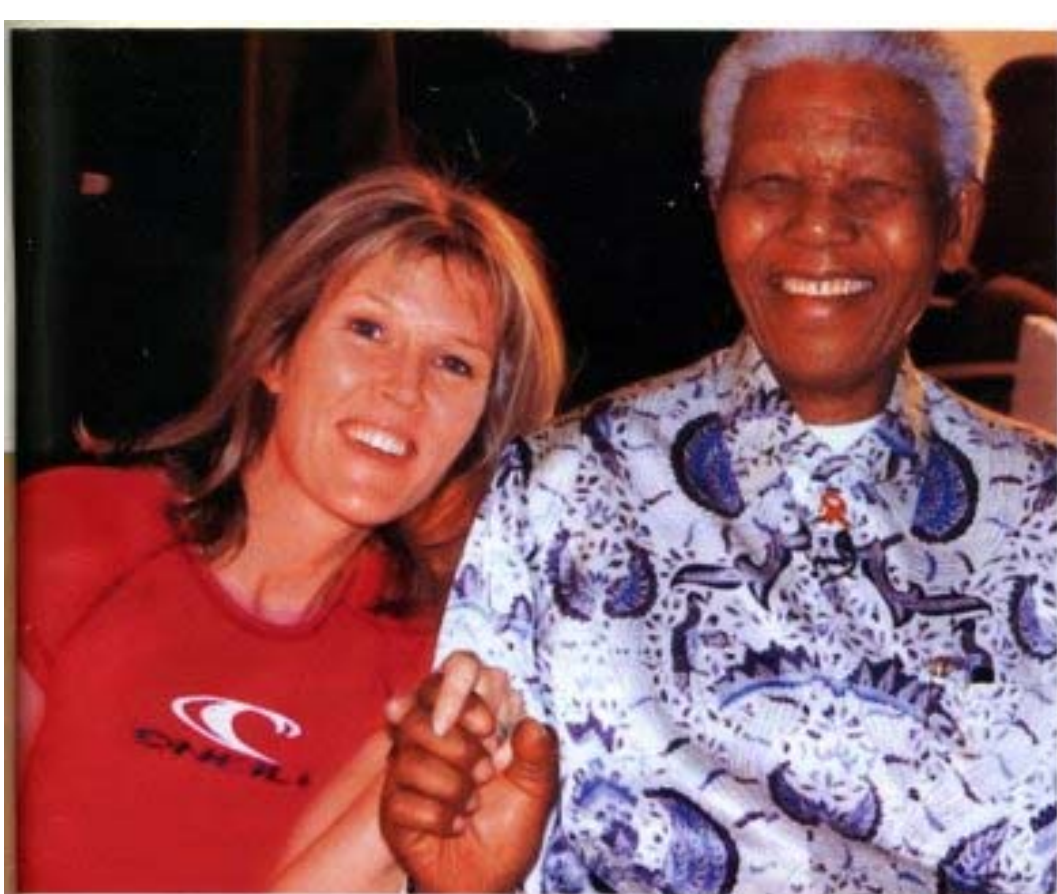
Not the average girl-next-door, this unconventional attitude has also extended into Jacqui's professional life. She's been a game ranger – a dream that took almost 10 years to realise because she was told that girls don't become game rangers, 'which only made me more determined to succeed,' and worked for the Johannesburg Zoo as their press officer, loving the interaction with the animals. But her latest triumph is the release of her first book, *An Unpopular War*, a gutsy attempt to crack open the lid of silence on South Africa's unjust war that raged through the 1970s, 80s and 90s. The book is a collection of stories from men who served in the old SADF, from their 'klaaring in' to 'klaaring out' ceremonies and what happened in-between.

'I wanted to know what happened to those guys and how they felt about it. The emotion behind their story was important, which is why the book appeals to a wider

# The write stuff!



Well-known for her love of the African bush and wildlife, Jacqui Thompson talks about switching horses to publish a book about our boys on the border



**OPPOSITE LEFT:** Jacqui's book, *An Unpopular War*, reached the Top 10 bestseller list within three weeks of its release.

**LEFT:** Jacqui's husband Jeremy Mansfield says that this is his favourite photograph. 'It was taken without either of them knowing and they're both laughing because Madiba had just asked Jacqui why it had taken so long for me to propose to her!'

**BOTTOM:** Jacqui at the D-Day Commemoration in France in 2005.



audience than just those who did their national service,' says Jacqui. 'It's not a war book – I wanted to capture the sadness, the joy, the stupidity, the tragedy of being in the army. If you look at the literature on the Rhodesian War, everyone seems to have been in the Special Forces, but in any army the majority of enlisted men are regular troops. I wanted to write about their experiences, the ordinary soldier, as well as others, so I interviewed

a wide cross section of men to get a wide range of experiences. Some were chefs, some were gay, some were in jail and some sailed the seas.'

For Jacqui, switching from campaigning for animals rights to writing fulltime seemed effortless, thanks to her mother's influence. 'She taught English and I inherited her love of books and reading.' Inspiration arrived in several unusual ways. A History Channel programme

where ordinary people simply retold their memories about WW2, 'and gave war a face for me', plus two big events – the commemoration of D-Day in Normandy which she attended, and listening to friends relive their experiences over countless weekend braais, prompted her to tackle a largely silent subject. 'When I first mentioned the possibility of *An Unpopular War* to a friend, I was told it wouldn't fly because it wasn't politically correct and people don't want to hear about the past, especially that part of it, which is why I kept it under wraps for so long.' But her husband, popular radio and TV personality Jeremy Mansfield, encouraged her to knuckle down and even contributed the first anecdote in the book.

'I'd listened to so many guys telling their stories about the army, often with a covert glance over the shoulder, that I knew their stories had to be told to acknowledge the part they'd played in our country's history. We couldn't ignore what happened and what they'd been through. It also irks me that there's more written about the Zimbabwean/Rhodesian War than our own history.' So Jacqui set about interviewing friends whom she trusted, who in turn recommended her to others. 'When I interviewed men I didn't know, they'd fold their arms and clam up. But once they got going, I was still there three hours later. Sometimes they'd go back to really bad places and that concerned me. I was worried



**LEFT:** It took Jacqui 10 years to fulfil her dream of becoming a game ranger.  
**BELOW LEFT:** Three of her favourite friends are her dogs, Rocky, Alex and Jesse.

I'd opened a can of worms that they weren't ready to deal with.'

Jacqui says the first person she let read her manuscript was her mom. 'I trust her judgement and National Service isn't something she relates to because she's living overseas. I wanted to know if an 'outsider' would find the book meaningful. If she

*I'm proud of all the men who overcame their fears to speak to me.*

could relate, I knew anyone who'd had a son, brother, or boyfriend in the army, would want to read it. My mom raved about it and couldn't believe the conflicting emotions she felt. After that, I knew a publisher might want it.'

Yet unexpectedly, Jacqui began to feel accountable to these men. 'They were grateful that finally, someone was telling their stories. I knew if I didn't find a publisher, I'd have to self

publish and if necessary, sell the books out of my garage. I'd begun to feel extremely privileged to listen to and record their stories. I owed it to them,' she says simply, but she didn't have to self publish.

'With solid family support, it was Jeremy who really held my hand through it all. We had no weekends and he later said he'd wake to hear me typing at 3am, but he put up with the distractions, the frustrations and the moodiness,' she laughs.

However, the hard work paid off and the response to her book is

overwhelming – it hit the Sunday Times bestseller list within three weeks! 'I've received letters and emails from women thanking me for helping their husbands talk about things they've kept secret for years. One woman said she knew exactly which parts her husband had contributed, so I knew I'd allowed their voices to come through. Lots of moms also said how difficult it would be now to put their sons on a train

and have them disappear for months at a time.'

Despite the accolades, her biggest hope is that the book cracks open a door and encourages men to start telling their own stories or publish journals. 'I added the ages at the bottom of each interview because I wanted people to remember that these were 17- and 18-year-old boys! They were in charge of platoons, made life and death decisions and carried weapons, yet weren't allowed into certain movies because of the age restriction nor could they eat in a Spur if they weren't white!' Remember the 1980s?

She adds that interestingly, many of the men, now fathers themselves said they'd like their sons to go to the army, but never war. 'It turned boys into men by teaching them discipline and responsibility. And none have experienced that degree of camaraderie since – those life and death friendships forged under extreme circumstances.'

And the final word from Jacqui, 'I'm proud of all the men who overcame their fears to speak to me.'

But what of the unfinished tale about her pets? Well, Patch is her gorgeous one-eyed cat from the SPCA. 'Although Jeremy was highly allergic to cats, I simply had to bring her home. Jeremy suffered horribly for three weeks with a runny nose and streaming eyes, but homeopathic tablets have cured him for good. Rocky looked vicious and the SPCA wasn't sure they could home him. He'd been abused and it's taken years of therapy, healing, dog whisperers, tons of food and acupuncture to help him heal. In the beginning, Rocky thought Patch was food and followed her around salivating but he soon learned – you don't eat family! 🐾

Feature: Megan Duff Photos: Peter Whitfield; Jacqui Thompson. Shot on location at America's Deli in Sandton Square (011) 684 9445