



* CELBRATING WOMEN *

Women in Parking talks to **Mandy Hickson**, the second woman to fly a GR4 Tornado jet on the frontline. She is now a motivational speaker, a published author, and recently hosted a webinar for the BPA's Women in Parking network. Mandy chats about serving in Iraq, her inspirations, and shaking off imposter syndrome

If there was someone at the urinal, I'd shout "I'm behind you!" Mandy Hickson is recalling her first tour of duty as a fighter pilot in 1999.

When she arrived at the RAF base in Iraq, she discovered there was no separate toilet for women because there had never been a female pilot on the squadron. There were other issues to confront: having to wear men's long johns ('they cut into your hips') and seeing, on her first day, that all the screensavers on the computers in the junior pilots' room featured scantily clad women. 'Obviously, on day two, they were changed to near-naked men,' she laughs. 'Funnily enough, on day three they were all landscapes.' Underwear and urinals aside, I wonder how it felt to be a woman going into what had been a man's world.

'I am sure you have seen in parking that the more women that come in, the more it becomes an appealing career,' Hickson says. Jo Salter – now a good friend of Hickson – was the first female frontline fast-jet pilot in the air force, after the rules were changed in 1992 to allow women to fly jet aircraft in combat situations. Hickson was the second.

'I talk about imposter syndrome a lot, because, yes, I definitely had it,' Hickson says. 'Not that I recognised it as such then, but I found out that I had been taken on as a test case – basically to see how far I'd get before I failed. That planted a seed of doubt. I pretended I was fine – certainly I don't think my colleagues at the time knew I had struggles – but I had my demons, wondering if I was good enough.' On one mission that Hickson was leading, they were engaged by a surface-to-air missile. She was fine while up in the air, but suffered afterwards. 'The self-doubt hit me like a train,' she explains. 'But you know what, we all have it. Yes, I was a fast-jet pilot. Yes, I've been a public speaker for 10 years. But guess what? I still have self-doubt.'

If we take Hickson as our role model, then we'll all be climbing mountains. Indeed, Hickson did recently climb Kilimanjaro for charity with a group of 20 women – an experience that made her realise how much she enjoys being part of a team. 'The sharing of experiences and building that camaraderie was amazing,' she says. 'I also loved working and walking with women. It was the best thing I've ever done. In fact, maybe that should be a Women in Parking field trip! I'd certainly recommend it to anyone.'

