How one disillusioned soldier made her escape from the Jesus Army

Nick Morgan

appearance of a normal teenager. Head to toe, she is dressed in black, grunge-style, with 18-hole Doc Martens and one eyebrow pierced. The letters KURT hang around her neck and pictures of Cobain and the rest of the band Nirvana completely cover the woodchip on her bedroom wall. But for Melissa, things have not been normal for a long time.

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When she had wanted to join the Jesus Army four years ago, aged 16, Melissa's mother Avril approved. "If I had only known a bit more about them, I would have never allowed it," she says now.

Mel smiles and rolls up a cigarette, lights it and inhales. "At the time I was going out with a woman called Lucy," she says. "Things weren't going particularly well, I was quite upset about the whole thing, in fact. I was introduced [to the Jesus Army] through a friend. At first it just seemed great, everyone was so accepting, they made such a fuss of me and I thought, this is what I'm looking for. Then someone prayed for me and that was it, I was hooked."

Cults are on the rise and students are seen as ideal recruits. "Cults often go for young people who are away from home for the first time Akshar of Triumphing Over a Handbook for Church of Christ members: "If the Garden of Eden was the paradise for mankind, then Halls of Residence are the Christians' evangelistic paradise. They provide the best environment imaginable for seeking and saving the lost."

Mel confims that the Jesus Army has much the same policy. "We were often told to distribute leaflets around the Sheffield University campus," she explains, "and while I was at college I was made to wear my Jesus Army camouflage jacket, so that everybody would be able to see I was a member."

Mel started to spend more and more time at Crown of Life House in Sheffield. Soon she found herself

wanting to stay over for the occasional night; this quickly developed into whole weekends. After being baptised and given the "virtue name" Melissa Militant, she was asked to take covenant.

"They say it takes 12 months of prayer and consideration before the covenant is taken — with me it took only six weeks. I think they wanted more young people and saw me as a good example for other students at

"At the covenant service, I promised to put the Jesus Army before my family, put my brothers and sisters in the church before myself, put the whole church system before my own life, before my own needs. I also solemnly promised never to leave."

For the first couple of weeks, Mel recalls, everything seemed great. "My lifestyle fitted in well with the

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household. Then they started to get more strict. One day I was wearing jeans: that was met with absolute and are vunerable," says Ayman horror by others in the household. It was also made clear to me that I was London's Cults. He goes on to quote expected to attend every church meeting. Once I had made this covenant, all my finances had to go into a common purse and I had nothing of my own. And the food . . . well, it was crap."

Melissa began to suffer bouts of depression which led to bulimic binges. This in turn aggravated her diabetes — a condition she has had since the age of seven — and she became seriously ill. "In the two years I was involved with the Jesus Army, I must have been in and out of hospital 20 times. They said it was God punishing me for being sinful. They said they didn't want me to go into hospital because according to them I wouldn't become ill if I was living by faith.

"At this time, there was a man in



Holy terror . . . The teenager formerly known as Melissa Militant

the Jesus Army I was friendly with. That wasn't a problem before I took the covenant, but afterwards it was forbidden. I got a note from him saying he loved me. But it was an impossible situation as he'd made a lifetime vow of celibacy. Then the church said I had the spirit of lust inside me and started to put pressure on me to take the same vow of celibacy. They said it was 'the higher way'. I felt I was too young to make such commitments.

"I was given certain disciplines. I couldn't go outside the house without a chaperone, I had to be driven to college and picked up afterwards. I couldn't answer the telephone, all my letters were checked and censored before they went out and checked when they came in. I had to have permission to see my mum. I had to ask permission to have a bath or to have seconds at mealtimes or even to iron my shirt.

"When I became very depressed, they said it was because I wasn't a good Christian. I was just so gummed in. Everyone else was so happy and I was so depressed, so I didn't question things."

Melissa was then expelled from the house and sent to a small farm just outside Northampton. "I didn't want to go, but they said: 'It's what God wants.' It seems stupid now but they had such a hold over me. I had no contact with the outside world. There was no radio or television, nowhere even to get a paper. I was just there working on this farm.

"One day I started vomiting, I was really ill. But they still said: 'Have some faith, believe in God and you'll feel better.' It was only after I had started to vomit blood that they took me to the hospital.

FOUND out then that my kidneys had failed. I had tubes from my heart and I went temporarily blind. The hospital called my mum and asked her to come at once — they were afraid that I might not live through the night. Later the doctors refused to discharge me unless I went directly home with my mum.

"Leaving the Army was not that simple. I found I couldn't cope with real life, I walked around like a couldn't cope with television, I couldn't cope with the choice of sweets. I just couldn't cope with the world. It was all so stressful, I wanted to go back. I just couldn't make my own decisions.

"More than this, there was a girl called Nikki who I had introduced to the Army. I felt so bad about that. She phoned me to say that she had to leave too but then changed her mind shortly afterwards. I drove to collect her with her father. He walked into the house, got Nikki's stuff, then took her by the hand and walked out with her. She did want to come out, you see, but she felt the psychological need to stay. Like me, she's in therapy now.

"It's taken a hell of a long time to be on my own again. It's difficult to be yourself when your individuality has been denied for so long. I have heard people call the Army the I'llbe-a-cabbage-for-Jesus brigade. l know what they mean."

PHOTOGRAPH: DON MCPHEE