Michael Smith’s career has taken him from military intelligence to monitoring for the BBC to becoming a defence correspondent in war zones. In the nineties he started writing best-selling books on matters that involve spying and spies. His first book on Bletchley, *Station X: The Codebreakers of Bletchley Park*; was a number one best seller and was followed by *The Emperor’s Codes: Bletchley Park and the Breaking of Japan’s Secret Ciphers*. The latest twist to his career has been a foray into script writing. Leaving school aged fifteen he imagined none of these elements of his varied career.

The film *The Imagination Game* drew on his research. That award winning film and Michael Smith’s latest book *The Debs of* *Bletchley Park and other stories* have emphasised the importance of the codebreakers in winning WW2. But that awareness is fairly recent. By the end of 1944 8,743 people worked at Bletchley Park and three-quarters of them were women.

A former Bletchley worker who lived in my village wouldn’t speak about her time in what some described as ‘the lunatic asylum’ even after she was allowed to talk about it: the need for silence had been so drummed into her. Despite that, we have come to know about Bletchley men like Turin and Knox. Now Michael Smith has given the women of Bletchley Park a voice and after his book was published in January, some of them appeared on *Newsnight*. Michael loves championing the underdog and uncovering untold stories.

Michael can write about military intelligence with authenticity because he has experience of doing similar work. His previous number one best seller Station X, the history of Bletchley Park was commissioned by Channel 4. But the book of which he is most proud is *Foley: The Spy Who Saved 10,000 Jews,* which led to Israeli recognition of the former MI6 officer Frank Foley as Righteous Among Nations, the same award granted to Oskar Schindler. And that recognition of Foley was also thanks to Michael.

Given his early life, his career as a writer was not a given. Michael was born in 1952 in Lambeth, London and left Borden Grammar School, in 1967, aged only 15. He said,

 “I joined the army just because I wanted to get away from school, and trained as a surveyor, with the Royal Artillery, but I didn’t find the work satisfying. I often ended up surveying forestry commission land or cleaning Land-Rovers. They recognised that I had a facility for learning languages and transferred me to the intelligence corps who taught me Arabic and later German.”

In the army’s Intelligence Corps he monitored Middle Eastern terrorist and Soviet Bloc communications including producing reports on the activities of the East German armed forces. After joining the BBC Monitoring Service in 1982, he vividly recalls a particular day.

“A Persian monitor listening in to Tehran Radio told me that a Fatwa against Salman Rushdie had been announced. At that time, I didn’t know the meaning of ‘Fatwa’. He explained that it was a sentence of death; allowing a ‘true believer’ to kill him. I realised this was an important story and, despite the concern of a nervous editor, I released it.” Mick’s instinct was correct.

In 1990, he became a newspaper journalist writing on Eastern Europe for the *Financial Times* and the *Sunday Times* before joining the *Daily Telegraph*, where he was Defence Correspondent. He reported on the 1991 Gulf War and various conflicts in the Balkans – twice going into Kosovo under fire to meet up with the Kosovo Liberation Army during the 1999 war. More recently, he has reported the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Mick’s empathetic nature has led him to write unpublished poems about a soldier suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress. Better known is his track record of breaking stories including the so-called ‘Downing Street Memos’.

Were there any assignments that immediately spring to his mind?

“I have seen a lot of dark, awful things, you do as a reporter, I covered Dunblane and that was horrific, not just in the deaths of the children but in the way someone turned from normal humanity into a maniacal killer. “But he was such a nice man,” is what you hear said so often of killers, and I don’t doubt they were. Something turned them, like someone flicking a switch in their brain. In the Balkans, I saw people struggle to hold onto hope. Despite all that dark stuff you do come away at times with an admiration for the resilience of the human spirit.

“In 1996, while writing a history of British Intelligence Services, I interviewed a former MI6 officer and said ‘Is there anything I haven’t asked that I should have? ’ He replied that there are a couple of guys who have never been properly recognised, Sydney Cotton, a maverick Aussie pilot who pioneered Air Photography and Frank Foley. He said ‘One of the interesting things about Foley was that normally, to be a good case officer, you have to be a bit of a shit’ he said ‘But Foley managed to be a brilliant case officer and a near saint. Schindler pales into insignificance alongside his work on getting Jews out of Germany.’

“I wondered why he wasn’t better known and I contacted Yad Vashem and they said there was no evidence to back Foley’s case. I requested information from their own archives and read the report of a Jewish aid worker, Hubert Pollack, describing how Foley had saved ‘tens of thousands’ of Jews.’ Yad Vashem had been under the misapprehension that Foley was protected by diplomatic immunity but that was not the case. He risked his life every day, going into camps and harbouring Jews in his home almost every night. He could have been arrested at any time, indeed, a colleague in Vienna was arrested because the Nazis wanted to send warning to MI6 about what they knew.”

Michael is the author of many books on intelligence and special operations including *The Spying Game: The Secret History of British Espionage*, which revealed details of how MI6 and members of the British Special Boat Service operated inside Basra throughout the 2003 war in Iraq. More recently he has been writing an unofficial history of MI6 and part one is titled *Six: Murder and Mayhem, 1909-1939.*

Michael is a passionate football fan and has co-written the script for Oxford based film producer Victor Glynn’s animated film in which a team on a table football game comes to life. ‘The Unbeatables’ is now out on DVD. He lives near Wallingford with his wife Hailey and has recently been awarded an MA in Creative Writing from Brunel University and hopes to venture into fiction. Could we be looking at John le Carré’s successor?