

MARIA WITCHELL

**LONDON
SPEAKER
BUREAU**

- **Former Special Forces Officer, British Government Operative and Professional Kidnap and Ransom Hostage Negotiator**
- **Explorer and Veteran of Eight Polar Expeditions Including Reaching the North and South Poles and Traversing the Antarctic Peninsula**
- **Managing Director Asia Pacific for a Top Investment Bank**



Maria Witchell is a veteran of eight polar expeditions including reaching the North and South Poles. She was recently part of a team to successfully establish a new polar route traversing the narrow plateaux of the Antarctic Peninsula in 2019. Maria is also a trustee of the charities 'Style for Soldiers' and 'LAW-G'.

Following university, Maria began her career as a British Army Officer after graduating from The Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. She quickly went on to complete Special Forces selection and became one of the few women to serve as an operative in the United Kingdom Special Forces (UKSF) conducting covert military operations.

As a covert operator in UKSF, she gained substantial experience operating in challenging, pressurised, intense and dangerous environments which included covert and counter terrorism operations of the most serious and sensitive nature.

Maria progressed to working for the British Government and then became one of the first women in the world to become a professional kidnap ransom negotiator operating worldwide with a particular focus on Central and South America. She negotiated the release of numerous high profile/high net worth individuals, leaders of global corporate entities and/or their close family members 'in country' negotiating with, amongst others, the FARC and ELN guerilla groups or with the terrorist and criminal gangs involved, as profiled in the film "Proof of Life" starring Russel Crowe and Meg Ryan.

After some years operating as a kidnap & ransom negotiator, Maria changed direction and attended, the College of Law in London, qualifying as a solicitor with a specialism in banking with a leading London city law firm. After five years, she then joined a major international investment bank becoming head of equity financing, legal in London. Today Maria is Managing Director, head of corporate loans and derivatives, legal for the Asia Pacific region located in Hong Kong.

Maria has held leadership roles in both her military and corporate careers and has considerable experience in the transferability of military leadership skills into the corporate world.

Maria's disarming style and sense of humour make her a captivating speaker. Challenging ideas of what a Special Forces Operative looks like, Maria relates lessons from some of the toughest working environments on the planet. Please see speaking topics listed below.

1. **"Negotiating with the Impossible: High-Stakes Lessons for Everyday Business"**

Topics

- Inspiration
- Leadership
- Motivational
- Sports
- Wellbeing
- Women

From jungles in Colombia to boardrooms in Hong Kong, Maria Witchell has negotiated under extreme pressure — where lives, not just deals, were at stake. In this powerful session, she translates the principles of hostage negotiation into business-relevant strategies: managing conflict, building trust quickly, staying calm under fire, and influencing outcomes with precision.

2. “Resilience Under Fire: Building Mental Fortitude in Uncertain Times”

What can crossing polar ice caps, surviving combat operations, and handling high-stakes legal negotiations teach us about personal resilience? A lot. Maria shares a gripping and grounded framework for recognizing stress, mastering focus, and bouncing back in fast-changing, high-pressure environments — essential skills for modern professionals.

3. “From War Zones to Wall Street: Adaptive Leadership in Action”

Maria’s career has spanned elite military operations, crisis negotiation, and leading legal teams in global finance. This talk dives into what adaptive leadership really looks like in unpredictable environments. She explores themes like decision-making under ambiguity, leading across cultures, and creating psychological safety in high-stakes teams.

4. “Invisible Grit: The Untold Story of Women Breaking Barriers”

As one of the few women to serve in UK Special Forces and later rise to a top legal leadership role in Asia, Maria’s story challenges stereotypes about what leadership looks like. With honesty and humility, she shares her experiences navigating male-dominated spaces, managing self-doubt, and mentoring others to lead with quiet strength.

5. “The Art of Focus: How to Think Clearly When Everything’s on the Line”

Whether in a freezing whiteout in Antarctica or a make-or-break business negotiation, Maria learned to clear away noise and execute with clarity. In this engaging session, she introduces practical techniques for focus, situational awareness, and mental discipline that help professionals perform better — especially when the stakes are high.

6. “The Leadership Edge: What Crisis Teaches Us About Collaboration”

Drawing on missions where trust and teamwork meant life or death, Maria explores how true collaboration happens — not in theory, but in crisis. She unpacks actionable insights on psychological safety, cross-functional teamwork, and leading under pressure, helping organizations cultivate stronger, more agile cultures.