



War Widows' Stories

History. Memories. Heritage.

A Collection of Oral History Interviews

Edited by Nadine Muller
& Ailbhe McDaid



The War Widows'
Association
of Great Britain



War Widows' Stories is a project run by Dr Nadine Muller (Liverpool John Moores University) and Dr Ailbhe McDaid (University of Liverpool) in collaboration with the War Widows' Association of Great Britain and its members.

The interviews reproduced in this volume are the result of a pilot phase which was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Liverpool John Moores University.

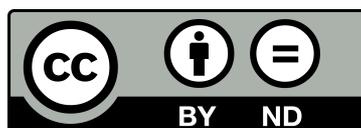
All interviews, including transcripts, audio recordings, and accompanying photographs, can be found on the War Widows' Stories website <http://www.warwidowsstories.org.uk> alongside information about the project and a wealth of resources and information on the history of war widowhood in Britain. You can also follow War Widows' Stories via Twitter (@war_widows), Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/warwidowsstories>), and YouTube (War Widows' Stories).

We welcome enquiries from prospective volunteers, researchers, the general public, and the media. For any questions about the contents of this volume or about the project, please email info@warwidowsstories.org.uk, or write to us at: Dr Nadine Muller, John Foster Building, Liverpool John Moores University, 80-98 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, L3 5UZ.

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FOREWORD

By Nadine Muller and Ailbhe McDaid

What is it like to be a war widow in Britain? War Widows' Stories wants to understand and raise awareness of the history of war widowhood in Britain past and present. To do so, the project brings together historical, literary, and cultural research with the life stories of war widows and their families. In September 2016, the project was awarded a Sharing Heritage grant by the Heritage Lottery Fund to run, together with the War Widows' Association of Great Britain (WWA), a one-year pilot phase in which we would train WWA members as oral history interviewers and begin to record the stories of war widows and their children. Fittingly, War Widows' Stories was launched live on BBC Radio 4 *Woman's Hour* on 11th November 2016.

Now, a year later, we are proud to be able to present you the collected transcripts of our first fourteen interviews. The stories collected here cover the experiences of women who lost their husbands and/ or fathers as a result of service in the Armed Forces during conflict. Several of our interviewees were widowed as a consequence of the Second World War, and we are painfully aware of how privileged we are to have recorded their experiences, considering the stories of so many war widows of their generation already have been lost. Yet, their children readily stood in to tell us about their mothers' lives as well as their own experiences of growing up as the child of a war widow in post-war Britain.

But war widowhood did not stop with the world wars, as the stories that are the product of the Malayan Emergency and the Troubles illustrate. No two stories in this volume are the same, and yet there are themes that connect them all across time, across circumstances, and locations. These interviews, we hope, will help raise awareness of and dispel many a myth about war widowhood. They are intended to capture women's stories in light of as well as beyond their loss of a husband or father, and, as such, they contain tales of sadness and tragedy as much as of happiness and love.

The work we have done to date would not have been possible without the collaboration and support of the trustees and members of the War Widows' Association of Great Britain, and the generous support of the Heritage Lottery Fund and Liverpool John Moores University. We are grateful, too, to Sarah Lowry, who provided our volunteers with thoughtful, invaluable oral history training.

Our biggest thanks, however, must go to our volunteer interviewers and our interviewees, without whose energy, time, commitment, trust, and patience this project would not exist. We dedicate this volume both to them and to those they have lost.



War Widows' Stories

History. Memories. Heritage.

An Interview with Rita Armin

27 February 2017

Conducted by Ailbhe McDaid



The War Widows'
Association
of Great Britain



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To do so, and for any other questions about this interview, how you may use it, or about the project, please contact Dr Nadine Muller via email (info@warwidowsstories.org.uk), or by post at the following addressing: John Foster Building, Liverpool John Moores University, 80-98 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, L3 5UZ.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

I = Interviewer

R = Respondent / Interviewee

[] = Clarification note

I: It is Monday, 27th February 2017. Conducting an interview for the War Widows' Stories project. An interview with Rita Armin conducted by Ailbhe McDaid. For the record, can you state your name please?

R: My name is Rita Mary Armin, but people call me Rita Armin.

I: And your age, Rita?

R: I am 83.

I: So can you tell us a little bit about your life at present ... what you do? You mentioned you work for the local police force.

R: My life at present, well it's a pretty busy one actually. This week I will be working two or three days at the local police headquarters in Stockport, I've done this job, I'm a PSV, which is a Police Support Volunteer, and I've done it for, this is my seventh year, seven years in May, I volunteered obviously seven years ago, and because I have shorthand and touch-typing skills I was snapped up, and I use these skills quite a lot. Tuesday and Thursday this week I'll be minuting meetings which are called Ward Level meetings. So it can be quite a lively meeting lasting for one or two hours so I finish those and come out of those armed with loads of notes and I'm able to type those up and then I float [email] them out to various people, usually the same day, and then that's ok for another month, so they're monthly meetings.

Now and again we get calls from head office. They want volunteers to do this and do that, and apparently I'm quite good at persuading people to be volunteers for the police, so I did this one day at Manchester University and got ninety volunteers. Don't know if they were all suitable, but the next day they had a day at MMU [Manchester Metropolitan University] without me, and they got no volunteers! Perhaps it was just a bad day.

I've also helped out with Drugs Squad. That was fun, in the middle of Piccadilly, wearing a t-shirt with pictures on my chest of all the people they've locked up, and that was on televisions at night when I got home. Yes, I like doing other things. We are having a fair shortly in Stockport, so I'll probably be on the stand there for people interested in being volunteers. They usually say, "Oh we didn't know the police had volunteers", so it's up

to me to let people know and I now wear a uniform but they won't let me have a pointed hat. [Laughter]

So yes, it keeps me busy, but I also do quite a lot for the War Widows' Association, and if there is anything coming up, like the AGM, I will be going to that to support the new Chairman, who is a wonderful lady. I've never met her but I feel as though I really know her because we've just emailed each other so much and she's pretty good. That's Mary Moreland.

Right, so here we are again, my main job before I retired was working for an airline. Am I allowed to say which one? The best: British Airways. I started off as a secretary and I worked there for nearly thirty years, and it was decided that I'd got 'too many brains for a secretary', so towards the later years I became technical, looking after two-engine airplanes which were just being introduced.¹ My main job was on the ground-to-air-radio,² had to speak to aircraft that were coming in with problems, and they call in; they call in to air traffic and they call into British Airways Ops [Operations] to say so many 'souls' on board, and then they speak to me, saying "B-Tec Manchester, we're fit", or "we have a problem on this airplane", and that's where I come in with my shorthand cos I'm able to take down every word that the pilots say. The first day I was doing this they'd never had a woman do the job before and they called in and I said, "B-Tech Manchester, can I help you?" and they said "That's a woman! That's Rita!", because at one time I had worked with the pilots, you see, so I know all the ones who were based at Manchester.

So yes, I went on from there and I absolutely loved that job, but I had to retire early because my husband became very sick and he needed, you know, full-time care. But I've also worked as a volunteer for Christie Hospital, and that was under the umbrella of the Red Cross, and I was doing therapeutic care there for a few years, but that could be very sad. I'd really get to know somebody, and then I'd lose them, so it was getting to me. I had to look for something else because I don't like just sitting at home. But apart from my job I have other things going, like travel all over the world.

Fairly recently I've been to Brazil, Panama Canal, Guatemala, Mexico ... Oh all over the place. Just a year ago I went over to Australia where I've been many times, but this time I visited New Zealand as well. I went on a cruise around New Zealand and it never stopped raining. Couldn't go out on deck some days, but Australia was fabulous. I called in at Perth, as you do, and I stayed for a week there. I had some friends that I met in China, and they said, "If ever you're near Perth, you must call and see us", and I said, "Don't say that because I turn up!" Anyway, I had a lovely time for a week and they're coming over here to see me in April.

I have a dear friend in Dallas, called Martha. I met her on the Panama Canal and she invited me to her place, and again I said don't ask me cos I turn up and four months later I was visiting Dallas, and I had the most marvellous time. She was in an old folks' home which turned out to be something like a six-star hotel. Well she had two cats and even the cats had bathrooms. So fabulous. I go there about once a year. I was there last year for her ninetieth birthday. I was her surprise. I didn't jump out of a cake, but it was absolutely lovely. Lovely family ... they make me very welcome.

So yeah, in the meantime, apart from working for the police, I like the theatre. I have some very, very nice friends, mainly ex-British Airways, and we go about together and do all sorts of things. I was out with a couple of them only two days ago. One was from Macclesfield, and one was from Vancouver, so just your ordinary kind of lunch. I like the

¹ Respondent correction: Aircraft. Instead of four engines.
² Respondent correction: One of my main jobs.

theatre. I love the theatre, and I like films. My favourite film star in all the world is Mr Tom Hanks. I think he is absolutely amazing. I got his picture with his signature on and I really want to meet him one day, and I'm a sort of determined person and I believe he has a house over here so ... I'm not going stalking him or anything like that, but I'd really like to meet him.

I: Well hopefully that can come true for you! Can I take you back to your early life, Rita? Where did you grow up? Could you tell us a little bit about your family? Was there any military connection in your family before?

R: Well I was a child during World War 2, so all my uncles, my brother, were in the forces. Dad wasn't in the forces because he was on munitions. He was making mines, floating mines in the sea so, you know, he was allowed to stay at home. But my brother, who was seven years older than me, was evacuated with me at the beginning of the war in 1939, and at the end of the war, the last year, he was fighting for his country in Germany. Then after he came out he couldn't settle down to his job and he joined the police and had a wonderful career in the police, became a police sergeant in no time at all. He did a grand job.

All my uncles were scattered all over the globe. Uncle Harry wasn't allowed to say where he was going, and then eventually we heard he'd gone to the Falklands. My mother's geography wasn't very good, and she told me it was somewhere off the coast of Scotland. Grandma butted in, who was bright as a button, said, "No it's not, It's off the coast of South America. He's gone all that way and he can't swim". And Mother again said one of her little sayings that made us all laugh. She said, 'Oh and he can't ride a bike either". And I have actually been in touch with the Falklands, because that's on my bucket list, and hoping I might hitch a lift with the RAF over to the Falklands because I have worked for the RAF when I was with British Airways. They borrowed a couple of British Airways aircraft and I used to go down to [RAF] Brize Norton to see the engineer and sort out one or two things with him. But anyway, that's another story.

So as a child, I was six years old when war broke out and I can remember that as clear as anything. I think I was evacuated on the Friday, which would be 1st September, and I was sitting in my new home and Mum and Dad had come to see me on 3rd of September, and we listened to whoever it was [on the radio] who said that war was declared. I think it was Mr Chamberlain. So, I was away for quite a number of weeks, months, and very unhappy.

We weren't made very welcome in the area because the local kids could only go to school half the time because the evacuees were in the school the other half. They locked me in a shed in a field where there was a mad bull outside one day, but anyway, I was only evacuated to Hazel Grove, which is only about four miles from where I live now. But anyway, when the war was over, which was amazing, because we did see quite a bit of action where I live ... I clearly remember the night of the [Manchester] Blitz, and quite a lot of people were killed just in the next road. 24 people killed in one house. They were having a wedding and even the bride and groom were killed. Just the father survived. And a landmine hit the house and a landmine used to come down in a sort of basket and that basket was found on the shelter where I was sheltering with my family.

Anyway, when the war was over, I can remember we had two parties. First one when the war was over in Europe and then later on when the Japanese side of things stopped. We were very upset about the bombs, the atom bombs. And I have, in fact, visited ... not Hiroshima, the other one ... Nagasaki. I've been there and it's so sad. I've been to Okinawa and visited all the underground shelters where the Japanese were committing suicide, hundreds of them ... wouldn't give up to the Americans.

Anyway, when I was about 11, I did the 11 plus in those days. I passed with flying colours. I was supposed to be going to the best grammar school in Manchester, and Mum and Dad said, "Well we can't afford it so you can't go". The teacher came 'round and the nuns came 'round, but anyway they couldn't persuade them. The school, which was a Catholic school, didn't give up on me, and there was an exam going when I was 13, so they put me in for that and that was for a commercial college in Manchester called the Gregg School, and I came top out of 140 girls, and I won a free scholarship for 12 months and that's where I got all my commercial skills. Shorthand, typing, book-keeping, French and, would you believe, horse-riding! But they couldn't afford that. I got everything free except French and horse-riding, and they found me a job. I went to work for a company called Marshall Fabrics. It was all textiles in those days, mills and textiles, and I was working in the office. A lovely company, and I really enjoyed the job.

I worked there for nine years and met my future husband there, Henry. So I met him when I was 15, and I started to see him when I was about 17, and of course the family were in a, you know, a bit up in arms because he was quite a lot older than I was, but I just took no notice. I'd made my mind up and so had he, and we married in 1954.³ I was twenty and he was fourteen years older, thirty-four.

But he did tell that he was a ticking time bomb. Got this awful injury in World War 2. He was in the Parachute Regiment and he made a jump, well he jumped twenty-six times would you believe, but the last one was when he was badly injured because they shot holes in his parachute, dive bombers over North Africa, and his 'chute of course didn't hold him up, and he just crashed to the ground and landed on his heels and jarred all the way up his spine. Of course, he really damaged his spine, and he was taken into all sorts of different hospitals but ... he carried a card with him that admitted him to hospital immediately to see this consultant called Sir Harry Platt. You might have gleaned that I've got quite a good memory so I can remember these things. But, you know, they expected this injury to recur at any time again.

And anyway, he coasted along with it ok, but they told him he might not be able to have children. Well, would you believe I told him that I was pregnant on his fiftieth birthday, so that was a nice surprise. Nobody was more surprised than the two of us! And, sure enough, nine months later I had this lovely boy, 9lbs 3, so I had to have a C-section. Baby was fine, but I was a bit rough for a year, but Henry used to do all sorts to help me.

Unfortunately, when Philip was about four, Henry's war injury had just got so bad he was wearing a support now, a leather and steel sort of support. They said they'd make a new man of him and do some surgery on his back. It all went wrong, and four days after the operation he was very, very ill. And he got over it, but instead of being in hospital for ten days he was in for three months, lost about three stone, and I brought him out in a wheelchair. And Philip used to help me get him into bed at night. I'd stand at one end, and Philip would lift up his dad's feet and get him into bed. He did all sorts for his father and unfortunately because of Henry's health, he didn't have a dad who could play football or games with him.

Things were pretty sad at first, but he bore his injury with great dignity, and then he started to pick up again and he had always been a great artist. In 1939, September, he should have gone to the School of Art in Manchester but instead of that he was in the Army unfortunately, but those are some of the pictures that he's drawn. He got awards from the Royals. Philip and I went [to London] to pick up an award from Princess Alexandra for that one. That's called sleep. We went and it was ages before she got 'round to coming to us, and we were told, "Stay in groups of six and she will come 'round

³ See Fig. 2 and Fig. 3.

and say hello to you". Philip was getting a bit fed up, he was about ten, dressed in a velvet jacket with a dicky-bow, and he just said, "I'm fed up, I want to go!" and I said, "Stop being naughty!" So I called somebody and said, "We're going because you know, he's ...", and [they said,] "Oh you can't go, she's seen Philip and he's the only child here, and she wants to meet him", and I thought, "Oh my god what's going to happen here". So I said to Philip, "You have to bow to her", and he said "I'm not bowing!" and I thought, "Oh my goodness", and, anyway, she came over and she was talking to the lady next to me and then she just said, "Is he with you?" and I said, "I'm afraid so", and I turned around and he was bowing like one of these nodding dogs, just doing this all the time. So she just had a talk to him, said "Why are you here?" And he made a speech. We hadn't rehearsed anything, and he just told her, "I'm here because my Daddy can't walk, so I've come to take his place". I was just absolutely amazed. And then she said, "Did you say you came from Manchester, Philip?" And he said, "Yes, it was the Cup Final on Saturday", and she said, "I know, I was there". And he said, "It's the replay on Thursday. Are you going to that?" And it was just lovely. She was really nice. And she said, "I'm sorry, I'm just having to go, but I've really enjoyed speaking to you". And she said, "When you get home, tell your Daddy I send him many congratulations, and his picture is absolutely wonderful", cos he'd won this prize. So, we came home, and Henry was in the kitchen making some chips, and Philip ran in and said, "The princess sent you a message". Henry said, "Oh, I bet she did", and I said, "Stop doing that, stop cooking those chips and just listen to your son", and he told him everything that went on. And I was really proud of him that day.

Obviously Henry lost his job when he came out of hospital ... couldn't walk. They tried to get him going for about six months and then just said to him, "You're taking the place of somebody who we can really help", which was awful. The way we were dealt with at the hospital wasn't very nice, but anyway determined as usual, I asked the British Legion for help because Henry's war pension was very low at this stage. It was only 14%, and he was a man who couldn't walk. It had never been adjusted. So, we had to go through all sorts. I remember we went to court one day in Manchester ... what day would that be ... about 1977 because not long afterwards both my parents died, so I remember that year. And they said they would consider his case, and he'd got to go here and got to go there, but in the end he couldn't go anywhere because he was so poorly. Seven of them turned up to see him [at home] one day, and he was having a really bad day, wanted to cancel it, but I said, "No, this is how they should see you", and they were only in ten minutes, and it was upgraded to a full Army pension straight away. And this made him feel better because he was supporting his own family again, albeit at first he thought it was something like charity, but I have to say the British Legion were fine with him and the pensions people were very nice. A lady used to visit him. Well, she was the one responsible for him starting drawing again because he used to just sit in that corner watching outside, but we had a very nice neighbour, an Italian lady, and she lived at the first house over there. When I was at work, I went back to work for British Airways, and when I was at work she would take him out in his wheelchair, whether he wanted to go or not. She'd take him out in all weathers, but she dropped the news she was going to live in South Africa where her daughter lived and where Philip and I had visited a few times.

Henry's first thought was, "Oh, no one to push my wheelchair now", and he said "Well, that's it. You'll have to give up work now". I said, "Well, no I can't". Because although he got the pension, my work paid for all the extra things: holidays and my car. So anyway, I said, "I've got a good idea. Let's have one of these electric wheelchairs for you". Now he couldn't have a scooter because of his spine. He had to have a proper chair and, wouldn't you know, they were very, very expensive. So, I asked British Legion for financial help and they said no. And I asked British Airways for financial help because they had a scheme, and they said no. So, he said "Oh well, that's it", and he was really

down then, so I said, "We'll ask the bank manager". So I went to see the bank manager, and he said yes, but we had to pay about three times as much. But anyway, it was just amazing because, again, it gave him independence. But the first day he went out he just thought, "Oh, I just press this and press that", but of course you had to get used to it. He took it on the main road, and I was seen running after him down the main road. "Where's the brake? Where's the brake?" But anyway, he soon got used to it and he was really well known round here. He went 'round to the shops in it, and he used to chat to everybody, and it was a real lifesaver for him. I had to retire early because he was getting really sick, so I retired in 1966 and then I was obviously a full-time carer ... No, not 1966. 1996 I retired, and Henry died two years later, in 1998. We came to live here about two years after we got married because in those days you couldn't afford to buy houses, so when you got married you moved in with your parents, much like now. We lived with his mother for a few years and managed to save up a bit.

I: Where was that?

R: It was in Longsight, on the border of Longsight and Levenshulme [Manchester]. But we weren't very happy there. She was a bit difficult. And then, after two years, we got on the bus one day, looking for somewhere to live, and a friend of Henry's who he used to work with told him that they were building some bungalows in Cheadle Hulme, where this man lived. Of course, in those days it was miles away, but anyway we came to have a look. There it was [the house], just going up. It was just a pile of bricks. They were having a bit of a problem with building number 3, because they wouldn't let him pull some trees down, the builder. Anyway, in the end they didn't build number 3 and we got two lots of land, which was lovely in those days because Henry was reasonably fit and he adored gardening so we had the best garden in the area. So, we've lived here since 1956 and been in this bungalow all this time.

I: Did you have to make any adjustments to the bungalow?

R: Yes, there was a wall here ... because Philip needed a room, and Henry needed his own room, and initially I was sleeping on the couch. We decided if we had a loft conversion, and to do that, we had this wall taken out, and to do that, he could sit in his chair, a special chair, but he could get into his wheelchair, and wheel himself into the bedroom, or sometimes he had a walking frame, and if he was having a good day he could walk with that. But he couldn't walk without callipers on his legs, so if there was any emergency during the night, he was stuck because it took an age to put these callipers on. He was going to the hospital about once a week because he was at risk of gangrene in his legs and feet, and he was diabetic. He had a heart attack, a stroke, all these illnesses came on because he was a sick man. I took him to the hospital once a week and they said he must look at the soles of his feet and investigate those every day, and he just couldn't, so that was another job for me.

I must have been talking about it at work with the engineers and they said, "We've got a surprise for you, a present". And they presented me with an engine inspection mirror, which was like a mirror on the end of a flexi hose, which they used to put inside a 747 engine, with a little mirror on the end, checking for any cracks on the blades. And I took Henry in and said they want to present you with a little present, and he cried. He cried when he got that. Again, it was another bit of independence. The hospital thought it was wonderful, "Did you get that from a medical shop?" I said, "No, I got this from British Airways". It's a wonder we didn't get the sack. I bet it was expensive, but they managed to get it out of stores for me and it was just great.

I: It sounds like you had good support from your employer?

R: Oh wonderful, from the airline. Any problems at home, he was all geared up with a little switchboard really, and he carried one of these alarms around his neck and any problems he just had to press that and it would alert me and it would alert the station in Stockport. They whizzed out and I would obviously ask for permission, and no matter what I was doing, I was just sent home. My boss had diabetes and he knew what it was like. The support was amazing, it really was.

I: What about support from family and friends?

R: Not a lot of support in those days. Not from the family. I had two brothers, but they lived the other side of Manchester, so we didn't see a lot of them. Mum and Dad died suddenly. Dad got knocked down by a car, and Mum died ten weeks afterwards, and that was only two years after Henry had all the surgery which had disabled him. So, I don't really know how I got through those years. It was just because of all the support at work, and it took me out every day.

I did have one or two breakdowns. I thought I was tough, but it just hits you. But anyway, medication, excellent doctors, my GP was absolutely excellent. I wasn't very well after I had Philip. I was quite poorly, quite depressed for a long time with postnatal depression and wouldn't tell anybody, typically. I had a most wonderful friend who was a nursing sister at Manchester [Airport]: Jean. She went back to Heathrow eventually, but we keep in touch and, in fact, we spoke yesterday, speak twice a week. An amazing lady, and she supported me very well. She stayed the first night I brought the baby home. "What do I do with this?", feeling like death because I'd got all this surgery, and she just stayed with me overnight and looked after the baby, who was absolutely excellent. He was so good. If he hadn't been good, I don't know what I'd have done. She was amazing. We had friends, British Legion friends. They used to go in the Legion on Wednesday and Sunday. They'd pick Henry up, three of them, and he didn't have much to drink because he couldn't, but they'd take him and they'd bring him home, and you know it got him out of the four walls.

Of course, I used to drive him all over the place because the cars I had, I always had a hatchback for the folding wheelchair, so I used to do all that for him. We went to Stockport one day, and he had a disabled badge, so we put that on [the car]. He had to get his eyes checked, and we came back to the car and there was a £30 fine because I wasn't displaying the right paperwork. I really freaked out and told them to take the ticket back, and they said, "Oh we can't once we've issued it, and we don't know if your husband is really disabled". I said, "He's in a wheelchair", and they said, "If the wheelchair had been in the car then ...". I said, "If the wheelchair had been in the car then I'm not pushing him, am I?!" Anyway, I dug my heels in again and said I'm not paying it, and all sorts of trouble, and then I found out the carpark was owned by the British Legion! That made it worse. And I started writing all over the place and it went to head office, and Henry was saying, "Oh let it go. Just pay it". One day a really posh car pulled up, and he [Henry] was looking out the window. "What have you been doing now?", he said. "Who's this?" This man got out with a bottle of whiskey in one hand and a bouquet of flowers in the other. A chauffeur was driving. He came and knocked on the door. "Mrs Armin?", he said. I said "Yes". He was the most senior one at Preston, where the head office was. He said, "I don't know how to apologise for this man. You say the word and I'll sack him". I said, "No, don't sack him, but retrain him and don't let him ever speak to anyone the way he spoke to my husband and myself that day". So that was all, and obviously he gave us "whiskey for your husband and flowers for you". And I said to Henry, "That was a good outcome, wasn't it?" But things like that happen to people in wheelchairs.

I: It sounds like you had to put a lot of energy and effort fighting your corner.

R: I did. Because he was poorly and he couldn't do it for himself, and he'd just have a negative outlook. But when he started doing his drawing again, he just changed. I had an exhibition for him one day, only in Cheadle Hulme, and there was a real artist having one in the premises the same day, and Henry was getting more [people] looking at his than this other man was. And this man said, "Who is this other bloke?", and I said, "That's my husband". He'd done a lot of lovely drawings, of Marilyn Monroe, film stars with nice features, like Charlie Chaplin, and he'd got all these pictures he'd done and he was selling them like hot cakes. He was charging about £20, and I said, "You could charge more than that". Anyway, one man came up to him and said he was an art dealer and he was very impressed. Apparently, hands are difficult to do and Henry had done a drawing ... I've not got it [here] now ... It was just a pair of hands. I'm trying to think, it was on another picture, and he'd taken it from another picture. He was so impressed, and he wanted him to do a big picture, and he came all the way from Blackpool. But as soon as there was any pressure, he wouldn't do it. "No, I'm not doing that". He just wanted to do it for his own pleasure. He did that one as well, over there, which is taken from that painting [statue]. I think it's called 'Petra' or something. That's in Rome anyway, that right-hand one. Anyway, that was a good day.

I: How did Henry take up drawing again?

R: Mainly because of one the ladies who used to visit him from the pensions people. She was called the handicraft lady or something. In fact, those pensions ladies were just wonderful. He had a welfare officer as well, who was pretty good. I got a phone call one day saying, "My name is such-a-thing and we were talking in the office and we don't think you're being looked after properly, Rita. We know how poorly Henry is, but if anything happened to him, you would not get a War Widows' Pension". Because in those days you had to be in receipt of a Constant Care Allowance, and I wasn't getting that. I didn't know about it. The Welfare Officer never told me, but these ladies in the office, who very often know more than the boss, they said if you get that... we think you should apply for that. I said, "Well, I didn't even know about it".

So that when he did die, there was no pressure, everything just went really well, if you can say that. The funeral was paid for and my pension started immediately [when] Henry's finished. You know, a good pension that is now tax-free thanks to the wonderful ladies of the War Widows' Association, and that means a lot. Although I get pensions from British Airways, I don't get a state pension, even though I paid for that all my working life, because you can't get two pensions, so I get my War Widows' Pension, which is tax-free, and that means a lot because it enables me to have a comfortable life and also help my family.

I've got some photographs here of Philip's wedding. That was a wonderful day. That was in 1994, so Henry was still around then. That was absolutely amazing. Philip has been a good son and he's good to me. He only lives about five minutes away and he's hopefully coming to fix the fence today. He's got three boys, Sam, 21, Josh, 20, and Joe, 15, and they all look like grandad. That photo where I've got a big hat on, that [Henry] is the image of my son and that's his dad at my son's age now. He's just the image of him. That's my mum on the left-hand side. I think it's before we had Philip. I think I was about 30, so it must have been about 1963 because I was born in '33. It was a cousin's wedding, a cousin who is a doctor in Liverpool actually. That photograph in the front, that's Henry on the left-hand side, and that's his brother who was in the Medical Corps and they've got World War 1 uniforms on there because they didn't have any World War 2 uniforms. They used to parade with brushes and they had cardboard tanks in the background. Things weren't good at all at the beginning of World War 2.

I: Did Henry's brother come back from the war?

R: He did. He was in the Medical Corps because he worked at the [Royal] Eye Hospital in Manchester, so obviously he was interested in things medical, and his Colonel or Captain was a doctor, and he saw in John something, and he became a doctor, but not a medical doctor. He worked for the Medical Research Association and he worked at Guy's Hospital [London] for quite a long time, and then he got fed up of the rat race in London and just went farming in Wales. He did very well because of his medical knowledge. His cows were the best in the area. And the boss of all the cows, there's always one leader, she was called Rita. And when he used to go milking, he used to put *The Archers* [radio programme] on and they'd all be swinging their tails. He had this lovely farm.

I: You mentioned you are involved in the War Widows' Association. Can you tell us how you became involved with that?

R: Well I didn't even know about the Association until after Henry died, and the first thing I knew was when I got my first *Courage* [WWA newsletter], and I thought, "What's this?" Obviously, there were various numbers in it, and I rang up and spoke to various people and carried on getting *Courage*. And in 2005, I was chosen to go across the arena in the Royal Albert Hall with this wonderful lady, Phyllis, who is in the magazine. I went to Birmingham or Wolverhampton to see her and she'd died by the time I got there but the two of us were side by side [in London]. There were nine of us and we trained for three days with the Marines Oh, we had some fun. And then we had to walk down the steps going down into the Royal Albert Hall arena and then walk across the arena. It was just an amazing experience. They put us up in a lovely hotel. I got that. I applied through the War Widows' [Association], but they didn't choose me. You were chosen by the Royal British Legion. They're a wonderful association.

I: Tell us a little bit about the British Legion and what they've done for you.

R: All the time we were fighting for pensions, we had a particularly good representative in this area and they're all volunteers, of course. This gentleman, I knew him through the airport, he was a director at the airport, and he'd come 'round here and dictate letters to me, and I'd be sending them all over the place and getting interviews for Henry, and going to court appearances, and what have you. I said to this gentleman, when we went to this one that was a pretty important one where ... well he didn't get his 100% there but he certainly got more than what he'd been getting ... and I said to him, "Are you coming with us?" He said, "I'm not allowed. I'm not allowed to go in that court. I don't even know what happens". I said, "If I get permission from whoever there to make notes in shorthand and give you all the minutes afterwards, do you think that would help for future cases?" And he said, "That would be amazing. They might not let you do it". I said, "I'm not going to mess about, I'll ask them". And they said, "Oh, certainly". And they wouldn't let him come in, but they would let me take all these [notes], so I did a full verbatim thing, and he said, "This is amazing. This will really help for future cases".

We had a British Legion that was just on this main road here until a couple of years ago, and they knocked it down and built a load of houses, and people were so upset about it, so upset, because there was a time when people weren't going in as much, but it had gotten better again, and it was so good for the retired servicemen, and even the young ones. When they came home they went in there. And Henry used to go there twice a week with three other lads who'd all been in the [Armed] Forces. Every Remembrance Sunday, he would march with them and he would parade at the Royal British Legion and then they'd go to the Cenotaph on the other side of Cheadle Hulme and have a brass band and all the rest of it. Of course, when he couldn't walk he said, "I can't go", and I said "Of course you can!", and I pushed him. And then when he wasn't fit to be pushed,

they would have the service at a different church every year, and I'd find out where the church was, and I'd be in the front row with his wheelchair, and he was still part of it. Then the last two years he just wasn't fit to go, and he was crying. He was upset and said, "Will you go and will you wear my medals?" So I did, and I've done it ever since for nineteen years, and I will do it until the day I die. But you've just got to be strong. It's no use weeping, and I weep when I'm alone. I don't weep in front of other people. And you can be lonely, but you just got to get out and do stuff. I'm fortunate in that I do find it easy to talk, as you probably notice. I'm outgoing and I get that from my background, I think, because I had this grandmother who was just wonderful, Nellie. She was the one who was concerned that her son couldn't swim and he'd gone all the way to the Falklands.

I think I was poorly, this November just gone, I wasn't very well and my son went, and Joe wears that little medal on its own there, my youngest grandson. Also, would you believe, the police take me now because they put a wreath on. When I first started with the police, I said to Joe, "Do you want to come with me and wear one of Grandad's medals?" And he said, "Oh, I don't know", and I said, "We're going to collect you in a police car", and that was different. So we turned up for him and he looked really smart with his medal on. We took him in ... the old-fashioned name was the Black Maria, the one they used to put the prisoners in with the cage in the back, and they said they were going to put them in the cage, but we didn't let them because they'd been out Saturday night and it wasn't very nice in there. I've had some lovely photographs taken at the Cenotaph with the various PCs when it's been their turn to put the wreath on, and Joe has been there with me and gone up when I've put a war widows' wreath on. I do that every Remembrance Sunday, or sometimes I would go to London instead, and that's a wonderful experience, and walk with the war widows there. But the secret is to keep busy. You can do your weeping on your own, but just do other stuff. I just feel that I help in the community by this police work, and I certainly helped when I worked at the hospital. One day I went on duty there, I used to wear a nice uniform there, a Red Cross uniform, and the Sister sent for me. We were all giggling, and I thought I was in for a telling off. I said, "I'm ever so sorry. Am I on the carpet for making noise?" She said "No. Just to say I always know when you're in, Rita, because everybody laughs. I can hear everybody laughing". And the ladies [patients] would always say, when you'd walk in, "Here's one who is not going to stick a needle in us". Oh, it was lovely I really enjoyed working in the [Christie] Hospital.



Fig. 1: Rita Armin with her husband's medals. 27 February 2017.



Fig. 2: Rita and Henry, just engaged, after dinner at the Grand Hotel, Manchester. Christmas 1953.



Fig. 3: Rita and Henry's wedding. Corpus Christi Church, Miles Platting (Manchester).
29 May 1954.



War Widows' Stories

History. Memories. Heritage.

An Interview with Bernice Bartlett

12 May 2017

Conducted by Nadine Muller



The War Widows'
Association
of Great Britain



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To do so, and for any other questions about this interview, how you may use it, or about the project, please contact Dr Nadine Muller via email (info@warwidowsstories.org.uk), or by post at the following addressing: John Foster Building, Liverpool John Moores University, 80-98 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, L3 5UZ.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

I = Interviewer

R = Respondent / Interviewee

[] = Clarification note

I: Today's the 12th May 2017. Could you tell me your full name and your age, please?

R: Bernice Lois Bartlett. And I'm 93.

I: Thank you. Would you like to tell me something about your childhood, Bernice? Where were you born? Where did you grow up?

R: I was born in Lichfield in Staffordshire. My father was a soldier, so I was born in the barracks, as you might say. We then went to Egypt for a short while, and then I came back to a place called Ashford, Kent, and grew up there. My father was a publican when he came out of the army, and I had quite a good childhood, really. I only had one sister and she was twelve years older than me. So, I suppose I was an only child as such. We lived at the Flying Horse at Wye, which is a lovely old coaching inn. It was country living. We played in fields, not like children today, we were always out somewhere. When I went to school, we had a school bus from Wye to Ashford. I went there, and then we moved finally to a place called Langley. We lived at the Plough at Langley. My father was still a publican, and that's where, at 16, my father died, so we then left there eventually and lived in Maidstone.

By this time, I had met Harry, my first husband. We went to all the dances there were then, and again quite a nice life, I suppose. Every Saturday night we were off somewhere to a dance, called the sixpenny hop then. As I said, we moved to Maidstone, and of course that is where I married when I was 17, so married life started quite young.

I: Can I take you back for a second, please? Do you remember much of when your father was in the army? So, you said you went to Egypt when you were young?

R: Yes.

I: When was this? What age were you?

R: I was a baby. Soon after I was born we went to Egypt, and no, I don't remember it. Not long after that my father came out of the army, and that's why we came back to Ashford to live for a while and then moved to Wye, as I've said.

I: Do you remember the year that you met your husband-to-be?

R: It must have been 1940.

I: You were how old then?

R: I was sixteen.

I: How did you meet?

R: In the village dance. It's still there, an old barn in a place called Langley. There was a local band, and we just knew everybody, and, as I said, I met him and from thereon, we stayed together, and that was it.

I: How old was your husband then?

R: He was 17, yes.

I: So, you were both quite young.

R: We were both young, yes.

I: So, how, if you don't mind my asking, did your courtship go? You went dancing, of course.

R: Yes, we went dancing. Of course, the war was then on, and he was going to be called up at some point, and we wanted to marry before he went away because that was the done thing then. So that was one of the reasons that I suppose we did get married so young. But then he didn't go until we were married. We had Bernard. Bernard was about eight months old, I think, when he finally went into the army.

I: When was this?

R: That would have been 1941 ... 1942 ... 1941. He hated it. Nobody hated the army more than he did. He did not want to go. He was stationed in Norfolk, a place called Downham Market, and I did go up there for a week to see if he would settle down a bit, but he never did. He never did like the army. Never wanted to go, and the thought, when it came, that he was going to have to leave on his embarkation leave, I think he would have done anything, really, rather than go. But the fact is I came from an army family. My bringing up was "You have to go", and so that was it.

At that time, by time he had gone away, I was pregnant with my second child, but he never saw him. He was born six months after he'd left. So, he didn't see his second son. Then of course he went to Africa and then to Italy. He went into Anzio and, apparently, that was dreadful, by his letters. You know, the bombing was dreadful then they made this journey. I've gone through this journey so many times on the map because, although he was killed near Florence, I never knew where. We have gone out so many times to try and find out ... because he was buried somewhere else first. I've gone through all the usual channels to find out where that regiment was on that day, and that particular day there is no record of where they were. We used to go out with his photo and look at all these villages around to try and picture where this photo was taken, but we never did find it. Of course, he's buried now in Florence cemetery. They moved him.

I: So, when was the last time you saw him?

R: I saw him ... it must have been 1942. It might have been just before 1942, before the Christmas. Yes, that was it, because Barry was born the following September. Yes.

I: When did your husband die?

R: He died September 5th 1944.

I: So, how was it for you with one child, and you were pregnant with your second when he left in 1942?

R: Well, I was living with my mother at the time. My mother had a house. My mother was a widow, and those days, widows only got ten shillings a week. So, my mother was happy to let me stay there because we didn't get a lot of money then. I think it was about four pounds ten shillings in old money we got. So, I stayed with my mother. As soon as I could, after that, I had to get a job because the money wasn't enough to keep us. So, I got a job, because I had never worked really, because I had stayed at home. My parents having a business, I always stayed home and worked at home. But I got a job in a hotel reception. It was lunch times, which suited me because of the two children. My mother looked after them, but then in the evening of course I could put them to bed and see to them before I went out in the evening and worked until about ten at night.

Then I used to have to come home ... sometimes there was an air raid on. I would be coming home with my hand on my head. That was never going to save me. I sometimes think, "What was I really thinking about?" But I always had my hand on my head, as I hurried home with an air raid going on maybe. Maidstone didn't get bombed an awful lot, but we did get the stray ... because the planes came over us and we could hear them. When I used to go to bed at night, and I did because I wouldn't take my children down the air raid shelter ... We had an air raid shelter in the garden, but I wouldn't take my children down there because my youngest had asthma, so I wasn't going to expose him.

So, I just used to go to bed with them and think, "Well, if it hits us, it'll hit us all because we're in the same house". We did actually have a bomb on the opposite side of the road. It brought the house down, but it didn't explode. Well, I don't think it properly exploded at all. It brought the house down, but there was not a big bang. We knew it shook the house when it came down.

I: Did you take your job at the hotel after your husband left, or after he died?

R: After he died. Yes. I suppose not long after, probably. Three months, six months. I know it worked, the hours worked very well for me because of the children. And of course we began to get the doodlebugs then. They were coming over. You could hear the doodlebugs coming, and then the engines would shut out, and you knew it was going to drop somewhere, but you never knew where the doodle bug was going to drop. Maidstone was quite lucky. They escaped quite a lot really.

I was offered to go to Scotland with the children at one point because they were evacuating people, but I couldn't really leave my mother behind. My mother was on her own and I thought, "Well, I can't leave my mother". So, I didn't go, but makes you wonder if life would have been different if I had. You don't know, do you?

I: Your mother wasn't a war widow?

R: No, my mother was a widow at 49. My father did die from the results of the First World War because he had been gassed and my father died of TB [tuberculosis]. So, I suppose by today's standards she would probably be classed as a war widow.

I: But she wasn't then?

R: No, no.

I: Do you remember much from when your father died and your mother was widowed? How did your mother cope?

R: My mother coped quite well. She was not a well person. She hadn't been for many years, she'd had cancer. I don't know. I suppose my problems outweighed hers, really, because I mean my father died in 1939, but I had always stayed with my mother.

I: So, your father died at the onset of the Second World War as a result of what he had been through in the First World War?

R: Yes, and strange, because my father had his calling up papers come through, and he would have loved to have gone back to the army. My father loved the army, and he would have loved it, but of course he was a sick man by then. Of course, he couldn't go. I think, my father was a soldier, that was his career. He loved the army. Wherefore Harry did not like the army. He was not a soldier. He did not like the army.

I: What was your husband's full name, Bernice?

R: Harry Thomas Golding.

I: Do you remember his letters? You said he wrote you letters from abroad?

R: Oh yes, he wrote.

I: What did he write about?

R: Well, the usual things, I suppose, about times when we went dancing, and when he came home, what we would do. You know, times would be different when he came back, and obviously he talked about the children. I suppose really, most letters, that was what it was. It was just every time reminisces about what we'd done before he'd gone away. You know, he would soon be home and we would go dancing again.

But of course they could only have so many letters. I think it was probably one a week or something like that. Then I had a couple of cards come when he couldn't write to say that he was well, but they of course couldn't write because they were somewhere fighting. Because he was a despatch rider, Harry. He rode a motorbike and took messages to the front. I had a letter from his officer after he had died, which I can show you there, to say that he always did what he was asked to do.

It's very strange, really, because he'd been gone ... what ... two years probably, when he died, I think. Yes, it must have been just after ... Nearly two years he'd been away.

I: So even though he never wanted to go, he clearly did his best when he was there.

R: Oh yes, oh yes. He did the job he had to do, but it was always, "When I come home", you know. No, he didn't take kindly to the army, not really. It's not something he would have chosen to do, no.

I: Did he ever tell you why?

R: Just because he didn't want to leave us. That was the reason. He just didn't want to leave us. That was his one thing. He was leaving home. I know we went to London to see a cousin of mine, whose husband was also on embarkation leave, because they

went from Scotland, that's where their boats went from. I can remember going for the day and them talking about having to go away, and [it was] not really what they wanted to do, [it was] what they had to do. I suppose in a situation when it's war they do what they're asked to do.

I: Do you remember the day and how you heard about Harry's death?

R: Yes. I had a letter from a sergeant to tell me that he had been killed. He said that ... this was before I had heard from the War Office ... to say that he had been killed and he was writing to me because he had promised Harry that if anything happened to him [Harry], he would write to me. And that was on the Thursday, and the War Office didn't let me know for another few days. I got the confirmation. Because although it hadn't come officially, you just hope it's not going to be true, but, you know ...

I: Do you remember what it said in the letter, the first one you got?

R: Yes, he told me that he'd been killed by a booby trap, and he'd been buried. They buried him with military honours in Italy, very nearly where he was killed because at that time the war was pretty bad. At that time, they were getting near to Florence, to take Florence, and we've been to this village where he was stationed because he was attached to the ambulance section. I don't know why that was, but that's the attachment. We did go there and that is where they had been the day before, but they had moved on for some reason.

So, that's why we could never find out. We knew it was around there. It was around there somewhere, but even the War Office they couldn't tell us, because I had tried. Even talked to some of the men who were with him. He has died now, but he knew Harry, and he said he couldn't remember, because they were moving up so quickly at the time, he couldn't remember exactly where they were. He knew near enough where in the area, but not the exact spot on that particular day.

So, I would always have liked to have found where that first grave was because we had a photograph come, and I did write to ... The British Legion have a magazine. They have letters in there, and I did write there, five years back, put Harry's photo, did anybody know where they were that day, and where they could be buried? I did have an answer from ... somebody rang me ... and he said that is Florence cemetery, but it wasn't Florence cemetery. He had obviously got the same photograph, because when I looked at the grave next to Harry where he's buried the first time, the man is buried next but one to him in Florence.

So, they moved the five of them, obviously, but it is not Florence. The photograph doesn't ... well, it can't be because they told me it was different, and I had confirmation that it was different, so. We've been out with the family and we looked all around. Bernard and I have looked, but no, couldn't find it.

Well, I suppose we're asking a lot because the photograph we've got today from then to now, although it's hills at the back and the trees, they would have grown so much all these years that, you know, it's different. There was a wall, it's a road with a wall, and it was at that wall we were looking for him. The wall won't change, but no, we didn't find it

I: So, you come from a military family?

R: Yes.

I: But I suppose that still doesn't prepare you for the day that the letter comes.

R: Oh no. No because I just didn't expect it. The letter came, the ordinary blue envelope, and I put it on the dresser. I didn't open it because it was the children's tea time, and I was getting the children's tea time and I thought, "Get them done, put them to bed, then I'll read my letter". Of course, I didn't realise what the letter contained. Of course, when I read the letter, and ... I mean it comes as a shock. In a way, you don't expect it somehow. You don't think it's going to be you. That's the strange thing about it, I think. I hadn't actually put the children to bed. I had got them ready for bed because I can remember Bernard being there. He was a three-year-old then. Of course, he couldn't understand why all these people were around, and, you know, his mother was upset, and so I hadn't actually got them into bed when I opened it. But you just don't think it's going to be you, I don't think.

I: What did you do once you had read the letter?

R: I went straight to Lou's, to his foster parents, or adoptive parents. He had been adopted, Harry. I went straight to her. Then at Lou's, she was out, and his father was there. I told him, and he just walked away. Then, I can remember her coming in and, of course, I was upset. She looked at him, "What's the matter?" I can remember him saying, "The boy's dead". You know, it was quite upsetting, really.

Then of course she came back with me to my mother's. The neighbours ... because, you know, you knew people around and the neighbours came, and I mean the daughters next door, their husbands were in the army. You know, I think it sort of brought it back to them, and unfortunately, her husband was killed later when they went into France. So, as she had come in to me, I had then gone in to her when hers was killed. I think people, they tended to sort of stick together more then, I think. They weren't so busy as today, or else it is war time and people are closer, I suppose.

I: Did you get a sense that there was a community around you?

R: Yes, you feel people who knew you and, obviously ... Particularly, I can remember the midwife that we had when Bernard was born. And he was born in the night, and Harry took her home ... because people walked then everywhere ... and Harry took her home about four o'clock in the morning and kissed her and thanked her for what she had done. And she was really shocked when she heard that he'd been killed. But I suppose people don't expect it

I also wrote to the people that we stayed with when I went to stay with him when he was stationed in Norfolk. We stayed with this elderly couple, and they gave us such a lovely week, and I had to write and tell them. It's doing those things, I suppose, that brings it more and more closer. Because it doesn't seem real at the beginning. Then it begins to become ... it's true ... because although you haven't seen them for two years they are still there. Then suddenly you have got to realise that they are still not there. And you can't, still, because you still don't ... It's very strange. It's still very difficult because I wasn't there. I didn't see him buried. And you still can't sort of imagine that they're gone, really, in a way because you haven't seen. Normally, you see somebody buried, you go to a funeral service, and it's reality. But that ... you don't see. You're just told something.

I: You didn't have that process of closure.

R: No, you don't.

I: Is that why you felt you had to go over to Italy?

R: Oh yes. Well, at the time, I mean, I said, "Well, one day I will go to his grave," never thinking I could because obviously then there wasn't travel. Not then, not as there is today. People just didn't travel. But I did say that I would go, and it was after my second husband died, and then Bernard took me. We went there, and I've been ever so many times since then, yes. I made a point of going every other year. The whole family went, second family. Everybody went. I mean it's a beautiful cemetery, Florence, and beautifully kept. But it's graves. You didn't see it as a grave somehow because you didn't see a funeral, you didn't see anything. No, but they are graves. It's very sad to see them all really, because there's so many.

I: How and when did you tell the children? Because your eldest son was only just three? He hadn't known his father much, really?

R: No, he didn't. Bernard says he remembers him. Bernard said, "I remember sitting on his lap". I've got the photograph of him sitting on his lap. Bernard said, and three, you think ... but knowing I've got a little three-year-old great granddaughter, who's very bright, and she has an incredible memory. I think Bernard probably does remember. You don't think a three-year-old would, but he says he does. It's difficult to say. You can't tell them at that age. It was always, "Well, that was your daddy", you know, sort of thing. You can't exactly say.

I mean, obviously as Bernard grew older he knew that his father had died. Because Barry died when he was four and a half, so ...

I: This was your second son.

R: My second child.

I: So that was not long at all after your husband passed away.

R: No. Well, Barry was a year old when his father died and yes, he died when he was four and a half. I didn't think then ... I think the world has got nothing more now to throw at me. But Bernard said, if you want to, he would talk to you if you want to talk to him. I suppose maybe he knows what it's like growing up. Although he grew up with a step-father, it's not his father. Bernard goes to Italy sometimes lecturing and that. So, he gets the opportunity of always going to the cemetery.

I: So, you had been told by those two letters that your husband had died. You had to tell his parents, the people that he had known. What did you do then? Was there any support? You said you got a job at the hotel fairly quickly.

R: The strangest thing was, and sometimes I've gone with the British Legion on a visit to Italy and I've met other widows, and we've all talked and said, "We had no support at all. Nothing." When it came it was, "Dear Madam, we have to report ...". A girl of 21, "Dear Madam." There was no feeling there, it was, well, we're just reporting, but we had no support. Nobody came. I mean we just had to get on with it. The strangest thing was also: my money, that had been four pounds and ten shillings, when Harry was killed, and for goodness knows why or for what reason, was dropped to three pounds and ten shillings. So, they obviously thought we lived on less. And there was absolutely no support. I wondered if it was just me thinking that, and I talked to her, and they said, "No, we had no support at all". So, it was just a matter of, well, get on with it. Which we did.

I: So, of course, as you say, there was no such thing really as bereavement counselling, anything like this.

R: No, nothing.

I: How, if at all, did you find out about any pension schemes or anything like that, the War Widows' Pension?

R: I think probably the War Widows' Pension came automatically. I think that was when I had one pension, and then probably when the War Widows' Pension came, it had dropped down. No, there were no schemes to ... I mean, I had to pay my mother £2.50 for our keep, and I had a pound a week left to get the children's clothes, any little extras they wanted or anything. But no ... We knew what it was, I think, to be really short of money, and just left. As I say, I had had to get a job, which I did. I went to work.

I: You wouldn't have been able to live on the War Widows' Pension?

R: No, you couldn't live ... Obviously I didn't want to carry on living with my mother, and of course you couldn't get anywhere to live then, it was almost impossible. I used to walk around Maidstone looking to see if I could see empty flats or something somewhere. I couldn't have left mum, well, I don't know how I would have lived if I had, but I just wanted to be independent, really, and stride out on my own. There was nothing at all. You just could get nothing. I went to the council and asked if I could go on their list for a house. And I was told, "Oh no. We're keeping the houses for the men coming home". I said to the girl, "Well, what about us that's got no men coming home?" She said, "Well, that's the rule". So, that was the rule.

I: So, you stayed –

R: So, I stayed with my mother until I married the second time.

I: When was that?

R: 19... Harry had said before he left, "If I'm killed, don't marry for two years, I might come back". So, it was two years after, well, two years and a bit, but I didn't know my second husband very long when we got married. He had been obviously in the war and he had been badly injured. He had been shot in his leg. His leg had been bone grafted to patch his leg, and he had walked with a limp. I suppose, in a way, we compensated each other for ... he had come back and he had always suffered from the war. It wasn't recognised so much then, these nerve problems that they get, but he definitely had them all his life. I mean we worked together because we were in the license trade, so I was always with him. So, he was never on his own really, we were always together all the time. We were married 37 years when he died, so ...

I: So, you lived with your mother because your husband had died, you got your War Widows' Pension, and then you got the job at the hotel.

R: Yes.

I: You said the hours were convenient with the children. So how did things work out whilst you were working?

R: Well, I worked from twelve 'til two. So, my mother had the children for the two hours. Then I used to take them out in the afternoons, and then go to work at seven in the evening until ten. So, they were in bed before I went out. I think if I remember rightly, I earned two pounds ten shillings a week, yes. And to me that was a fortune. When you think of the cost of things that they were then.

I: That meant you could make do?

R: Yes, I could. Yes. I could get by then.

I: I know you said you met other war widows via the British Legion and your trips to Italy with them. Did you know any other war widows then? Was there any kind of community?

R: No. I didn't know ... Living in Maidstone, no. I didn't know anybody. I know the night that when peace was declared, I was working, and all the crowds in Maidstone were all out. The streets were full of people rejoicing, obviously. The war was out. I walked home after working and thinking to myself, "What have I got to celebrate?" Everybody was in the streets, but no, I didn't know. The only time I do know, the only other person, was two years afterwards, or a year, probably not two years after, probably a year, when we went back into France. The girl that lived next door, her husband was killed when they went back into France. Other than that, and even now, I very rarely ever meet a war widow. I mean there must be ... I'm sure there's lots around ... But I go out, I play cards, I go to whist drives or bridge drives and play cards and I never meet anybody that's lost their husband.

I: How did people react at the time when you realised you had lost your husband in the war?

R: Well, I don't think they did, really. I think it was a war that was on. My mother wasn't a very feeling woman, so I never got a word from my mother that she was sorry. My mother was not that type of person. She was quite hard. No, I think it was almost, "Well, you carry on". You know, the war was still on, everybody was ... In our particular road where we lived, they were sort of older people, there weren't many men, I don't remember any men going from there except for next door, but her husband didn't come from Maidstone anyway. He came from away. She met him because his regiment came there, so that was the only other one.

No, my sister, no. They actually asked me, my sister did one day, my mother and her, had obviously been talking, and my sister, we were upstairs in the bedroom doing something ... I was very close to my sister ... And she said, "Have you thought about having the children adopted?" I said, "No, I would never do that". And I couldn't really believe that they had even asked me. I suppose they thought I was young, with two boys, but I would never ever have thought of that. No. It was really a very strange time, really.

I: So you worked at the hotel for how long? Do you remember?

R: I was there until I got married again because then very often when you got married they didn't want you in these jobs once you were married. So, I was there until I got married again in 46, yes. When the war was over.

I: Did you lose your war widow's pension?

R: Yes. But Bernard did go to a private school. I fought for that because that was our ambition, that was what we talked about. We were going to go into the licensing trade and we said that, you know, we'd educate Bernard. So, I did fight for that and I got proof from the brewery that we had approached them, and Bernard went to a private school until he was eleven, and then we moved to Sheerness, and there wasn't one on the island, actually, private school of any sort. So, he went to the local school and the head master said to me that Bernard was well ahead with his maths, a bit behind with English,

but not that much, and the 11 Plus was coming up, so I would be giving him a little extra push where English is concerned.

Bernard was the only child in that school that passed his 11 Plus. He was allowed out of school to come home to see us, to tell us. I can remember him now rushing in to tell us that he had passed. Because Bernard was always ambitious. It was his aim to go to university when not so many people went, when Bernard went. It was always his aim to go to university. He went to Pfizer's for a while, too. Pfizer's would have put him through the university if he had done it their way, which was a year at university then a year working, a year ... And Bernard went, "No." He wanted to go to university, and he did. And that's one of the big regrets that he couldn't tell his father what he had done.

I: Of course, he's done very well, hasn't he? He's a Professor of Chemistry at Newcastle?

R: Yes, and he won't retire. No, I mean, he's up at six every morning, off to work. Loves his job, Bernard, loves doing what he does. Yes.

I: So, it's paid off.

R: Yes.

I: Could you tell me about when you met your second husband?

R: Yes. I met him where I went to work. It was obviously –

I: What was the hotel called, Bernice? Sorry ...

R: The Star Hotel in Maidstone. Yes, I mean because I wasn't looking for a husband. We just met. He was working there. He had come out of the army. Well, he had been in hospital eighteen months in Egypt, and brought back here to have bone grafts. And he was working there. It was just ... So that's how I met him.

I think the people that worked there, they used to tell everybody, "Our cash," they always called me because I used to do the cash, "Our cash is a widow. She's got two little boys". They used to tell everybody because my boys used to come to meet me, so they all saw the children. Yes, he still limped quite a bit, my second husband, when I first ... Well he always had it. I saw it. He still did limp a bit.

I: Do you remember when you first saw him?

R: Yes, well, just working because I was in the cash and he was there in the hotel. Yes, well, I went out with him a couple of times, and it came up about I had been brought up in a pub. I had always worked, that's what I always did. I had said, you know, that's the only life I really know, that's the life I like. He said, "Well, I would like that life." He said, "The only thing is, we could get a pub, but we would have to get married." Well, that was the proposal." [Laughter.] Yes, so, that's how we always worked together, so.

I: How did you work together from then?

R: We did, we got married, and we went into the licensing trade. We had country pubs, and that's all we ever did. I suppose I grew up in one, I had sort of ... It's quite a life I liked. I quite liked it, you know.

I: Which pubs were they?

R: Well, the first one we took was at Sheerness, on the Isle of Sheppey, called The Hero of the Crimea. [Laughter.] Very elegant name. Then we moved, and we had The Swan at Sellindge. Then we moved and we had one at Burham. Then we came back, we had one in Gillingham. That was the last one we had.

I: Then you retired?

R: Yes, we retired, but what we did do for a few times is we did the relief. When people were going on holiday we did the relief for two or three weeks. In our day, we didn't do a lot of food, but then food started to come in, and I started to do food. I couldn't believe ... We never made an awful lot of money in our pubs. I mean, there was not a lot of profit then, but when food came in ... For three weeks I used to do the food. I can't believe the money. Well, we used to have a holiday afterwards, which we never had before. We hadn't made that sort of money. I just liked the life, being busy. Well, like now, I'm okay all day. Evenings I want something to do because I've always been used to doing something in the evening. Of course, well, I still play cards a bit/ I don't get out. I've stopped driving now. I stopped driving a year ago.

I: How do you feel now and how did you feel then about losing your War Widows' Pension when you remarried?

R: I thought it was unfair. Well, I don't know. I just thought they never appreciated the fact that we had been left because, at the end of the day, we had given up a lot, we had given up our husbands. I wouldn't have minded so much if they had reduced it, but to stop it entirely ... I didn't think it was fair, no.

I: I suppose the implication is that if you remarry you were no longer a war widow.

R: Yes, exactly. I can understand that. I know when the liberals were canvassing one day in Littlebourne, they were against us getting the war pension back, the liberal party. It was well known. And this lady came to the door, and she was canvassing for the liberal party. She said, would I vote for them. I said, "Well, no". I said, "I was a war widow". I said, "You were one that, your party ...". So, she said, "Well, it was your choice wasn't it, to marry again?" So, I said, "Well, perhaps," I said, "I won't go into details". I said, "But really and truthfully, I had no other choice". I was quite cross really to be told, yes. I know it was our choice, but what did they expect us to do?

I: Of course, even if you remarry, that doesn't change the fact that you lost your husband to the war.

R: No, nothing would ever change that. Nothing. No. Nothing would change the fact that my children hadn't a father.

I: You said that your son and what you call your second family, so the family that I assume is attached to your second husband, you said you went to Italy several times?

R: Oh yes.

I: Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

R: Yes.

I: When was the first time you went?

R: The first time we went, Bernard took me. It must have been about 1984, probably.

I: So, almost exactly forty years after your husband pass away, your first husband?

R: Yes. And Bernard, and his wife, and her mother, and I went to Italy. I can remember when we landed in Italy ... Oh it was a strange feeling. Yes, very strange. Then I started to go with the British Legion tours, and they used to go all around the different cemeteries because Italy has got so many small cemeteries. So, I started going with them because I felt that you've got more in common with them, you know, and if you feel a bit upset. I didn't like getting upset in front of the children. Wherefore, if you go with them, it's not so bad.

Then after a few years, we went out and we started staying in a castle, or a castile as they call it, but a castle we call it. It's near Sao Paulo in Italy. And you get to this place and then you go on this track and you go up this, and you go round and round and round. It's really right at the top. Beautiful, old, and apparently even got Roman ruins, part of it. What they had done, they had made it into apartments.

We went out and the first time we went out, we had the apartment with the ... one, two three ... with five bedrooms. Bernard didn't come that time that the second family all came out because they are very good, they always, especially my daughter, she'll always arrange to go. She's really very thoughtful. Then from there on we went there every other year, to there to that same place. Then Bernard came out one year. Bernard came and his daughter came with her three children and her husband.

We had two of the apartments then, so we had more of the ... But inside, it's a place where you needed lots of family. It was really eerie in this place. They had these big photographs ... pictures ... And the children said, "I can't stay in that room, that woman looks at me, nan. It's awful." All these big ... Very Italian. The two men that ran it, they were so helpful, they would do anything for you. You know, if the cars went wrong, you could always go them, they knew exactly what to do. They used to look forwards to us coming every other year. They used to be out there waiting for us to come to them.

The last time they went, I couldn't go. I wasn't well enough. But my granddaughter went, and her partner at the time, her father was a regular soldier and he got the wreath, special wreath to take out. They went out. Bernard has said you know, if I want to go out, just for a weekend ... but of course I've got to get from here to my son, my other son. He would always take me from here to meet Bernard, but I'm getting to that age now where travel's not Tim, my other son, he drove me all the way last time because I said, "I don't feel like flying". "Oh, I'll drive you," so he drove me there. If I said to him, "I would go to Italy, Tim, if you drive me," he would drive me, but I don't think it's fair really, it's such a long way. It is a long way.

I: He might like road trips with his mother.

R: Yes. Well, I'm sure he would do it. Even my granddaughter's partner, he's in the army. "Oh, I've driven. If you really want to go, I'll drive you." Do I feel fit enough to go? I don't know.

I: You said when you first went in 1980 or 1981 with your son and his wife, you said it felt very strange –

R: I did.

I: – when you got off the plane. Why did you think that was?

R: "I'm here, I've come". It was something I had always said I would do, and I have done it. Because, I suppose, really, when the children are small, you've got to think of whether you can go, and, I suppose, the opportunity didn't come. It wasn't there then so much to be able to do it, you know. It wasn't until I said to Bernard, you know, "Can we go to Italy?" Bernard said, "Of course". Bernard can still go and does still go.

In fact, there was a piece, I think it was [Jean-Claude] Juncker, that's his name in the European ... It's Juncker, isn't it? Something like that. He wrote something about us not visiting our cemeteries, or something. Bernard read that in the *Telegraph*,⁴ and he also wrote back to him to tell him we did go. We did visit, you know. He was quite upset to be told that we don't visit our graves.

I: It's a very generalised statement to make, isn't it?

R: Yes. Well, it's a sensitive subject really because well I suppose there is less and less people left now to visit, when you think about it. Well, it's very sad really when you look at a cemetery like Florence. All the foreign troops that are there. Indians, there's a large, large selection of Indians. You know, it makes you wonder if those people could or did ever visit because could they ever afford to visit? You don't know. So, I don't think he should make that remark.

I: Were you aware at the time, in the early 1970s when the War Widows' Association was founded, was that something that was on your radar? What they were doing in the 70s and 80s ...

R: I didn't join until the 80s. That was when my second husband died. I never thought it fair while he was alive because that was my life, but after he died then I felt that I could do all those things I had wanted to do, always wanted to do, and could then do without hurting anybody's feelings. Because, I mean, you marry a second time, you cannot keep harping ... It's there, I mean he never minded. I mean, I don't think he would have done, although he never brought it up. So, it was never mentioned.

I: So, it's not something you talked about?

R: No, never.

I: He hadn't been married before?

R: No, it was never ever brought up, not once. No. Well maybe there's reasons for that, but he wasn't one ... I mean he never talked about my little boy, either. It was almost as though he had closed a door. He probably thought it was something that he didn't want to bring up. Maybe he thought it was best that way, you know. I suppose different people look at it different ways.

I: So, during your second marriage, had you already been aware of the War Widows' Association and the kind of campaigning –

R: Oh yes, I knew everything. Oh yes, I did. I knew everything, and that's why afterwards I joined the War Widows' Association. Also, I used to go to the British Legion meetings, as well. I always did sell poppies. I always sold the poppies, yes. I've always gone door-to-door with my poppies.

⁴ Bernice is referring to: Matthew Holehouse, "Eurosceptics Should Visit War Graves, Says Jean-Claude Juncker", *Telegraph* (4 March 2016).

I: Is that because of the combination of your father –

R: I always felt that was something ... Yes, because we even did it before the second ... My sister and I always sold poppies. Yes, we always did it. Yes, and I have here in the village, right up until two years ago. They've always had somebody at the village hall just down at the road here, always somebody outside there. Every year I've done my stint there. In the end I had to say, "I'm sorry, I just can't stand any longer."

I think if you've got an interest you've got to follow it through, I think. I always thought, I don't know, for those really more that's injured than anything, because a lot of those that are badly injured do need an awful lot of support. I don't think always that enough is said about them, you know.

I: So, have you been going to Remembrance services?

R: Yes.

I: The ones in November ...

R: Oh yes. Yes. My daughter and her partner, we went to Canterbury Cathedral one year. It was packed, but I felt there were all these dignitaries all around here. We were wedged up the side here. I thought, I'm still getting as much respect now as I did the day he died, because it was almost ... I'm more important than those ... I've got more reason to be here than all those people sitting. We were literally ... We couldn't even see anything. We were just shoved up this side. But the village church is different, in the village.

We go now, every year, we've been going because Harry's name wasn't on the memorial on the village he grew up in, which was Loose, near Maidstone, because we lived in Maidstone. But Maidstone has none. But Maidstone hasn't got a name, not for ... only for the Buffs [The Queen's Own Buffs, Royal Kent Regiment] because that's the Maidstone regiment. So, I started. I wrote to Loose Council and said that I felt as my husband had grown up in Loose I thought his name should be on the Loose memorial. He had gone to school there, he had gone to the church there, he had grown up completely there. Anyway, they were very helpful. It took about at least ten years to get his name on that memorial. It was all to do that you have to write to the synod, you had to do this, do that, do that, the other. Anyway, finally, three years ago, finally his name is on the Loose memorial. It's a new one. There were three people that weren't on that memorial. It's in a little village, pretty little village, and church is sort of, it's up a little, not by the church, very old church, not much space, but the cemetery is on the side where the memorial is. So now, every year, we go back to Loose, to the service there because his name is read out now every year when we go there, so.

Bernard's family, which is Harry's grandchildren ... It's very strange: Harry had lovely auburn hair, and when my two children were [born], it wasn't there. This lovely dark, almost red, deep hair. My children didn't have it. Barry's was blonde and Bernard's was brown, more my colour. When the great-grandchildren came along, Bernard's children, the grandchildren: no, not a sign of it. The great-grandchildren, there are three of them that have got auburn hair. Yes, and I said, "It's a good job that I'm here to tell the tale because I know where that hair [comes from]". So, it's unbelievable, isn't it, how the genes are still there. Of course, when I see them, their hair, I think, "Oh, that lovely hair".

I: That must have been lovely to see ...

R: Yes, it is because it's almost unbelievable to come out in the latter children.

I: Have you ever been to the War Widows' [Association] Service of Remembrance in London?

R: No, I can't go up there. It's too much for me to stand about. The British Legion put me across, and also the women's branch have got a section. So, I have one there. My grandson, he works in London, a couple of years ago I said to him, "Paul, if you're near Westminster, will you where the cross is?" I didn't realise they were going to send me a map afterwards. They would send me a map to say where it was. Anyway, he said, he went, he said, "When I got there, I couldn't believe it". He said, "There's this sea of crosses", he said, and I thought, "I will never, never find this". He said, "And I looked down, and it was there." Yes, so he sent me a photo through. No, I would have liked to go, which I could have done, to the Albert Hall.

I: For Remembrance Sunday?

R: Yes, but I couldn't, I would blubber. I couldn't go. I admire those women who sit there through it, but I wouldn't because I would have made a proper, you know, I would have looked stupid. So, I thought, "No". I could never sit through it, but I would like to go but I can't go, if that makes sense.

I: You feel it's better for you?

R: Not to go. Yes.

I: Not to go.

I: Yes. I mean even, you know, the march past, I've always thought I would love to do it, but I couldn't, yes. But I do admire the people that do because I mean, some of them are not fit you know, they do do it. I've been there once, with Bernard one year. We went up and we got quite close to the Cenotaph. It was quite an experience, yes.

I: What are your thoughts about war widow's today, Bernice? I know you said when you said you went to Canterbury Cathedral and you felt like, oh, people were paying as little attention to you as they had been in the 1940s.

R: I think today that they are looked after far better. And so they should. I mean, they make sure they have a house to live in. That they've got a decent pension. I mean they should be looked after because it's not something that is easy to take, really, because you are young people. We hadn't been married 40 or 50 years. I mean we were married, Harry and I were married for four years. I mean they've taken away our young life, really. And I think today that, yes, they should look after them and make sure the children, as well. Yes, I really do.

I: I realise I'm jumping a bit now, but I just realised I had forgotten to ask you something. We were talking about you being aware of the War Widows' [Association's] efforts, even before you joined, so you were aware of what was happening in the 70s. So, what made you join when you did, after your second husband's death?

R: Because I suppose it was something ... I don't know, you're clinging on somehow. It's unfinished, something. I don't know, it's something, I think you're still clinging on somewhere, I think. I don't think you ever really let go, to be quite honest, because probably you're just told your husband is killed, that's it. Nothing else. That's it. And I suppose you still cling to that, I think.

I: What were you hoping for when you joined?

R: Just to be a part. Just to take part really. Yes, because, as I said, I think I was just carrying on where I thought I should have been in the first place. I mean, I suppose when I joined, I mean I was still very busy because when my second husband died, while I'm living in Littlebourne I came to look after my daughter's three children. She went back to teaching, and there was a five-year old, a three-and-a-half, and a baby.

So, I came to look after them. I think at that time I was very, very busy, but I still wanted to join all of those things, but I didn't have the time then to go. Although there's not much in meetings ... Apart from the British Legion, I used to go the meetings in the village. To the British Legion meetings. I don't know of any other, I don't think there are any associations in this area to be quite honest. I mean when I look through their [the War Widows' Association's] book, they've got quite a bit going on in different places, but you don't find Kent really. There's not a lot going on in Kent. Maybe north Kent, which is quite a way away really. I mean they have a lunch that they used to do, but it was quite a journey, you know, even when I drove it would have been quite a journey to drive, you know, but.

I: Were you aware that when you first got your war widow's pension after your first husband died, were you aware at the time that it was taxed at 50%?

R: Yes.

I: As unearned income?

R: Yes, Margaret Thatcher did that, yes.

I: She was the one who abolished the tax finally in 1979.

R: Yes, she was.

I: Yes. How did you feel about it at the time when you knew that 50% of your War Widows' Pension ... ?

R: I was quite grateful actually because my husband never having gone to work as such, we didn't have a pension from work pension. So, when I was left, I just had the basic pension. So, I was quite grateful for the fact that I had got a decent pension. Seemed to be strange, in a way, that you got it then, I suppose. I think, I don't know. It still seems strange sometimes because it was too ... The help came too late really. We should have been helped earlier. I mean that's what I always felt. I just felt that we were just forgotten I suppose, really. You know, we had to make our own way with very little money, you know, and it was little money.

I: 50% of it was taken away because that was the tax you would have paid in 1945 –

R: Oh yes.

I: -- because it was [classed as] an unearned income.

R: Oh yes. Yes, it's incredible when you think back. I'm pleased that it has changed now because it's still of an interest to me that, you know, when I see ... I mean, it's terrible that men are still being killed, and have been. My grandson went to Iraq twice, to Afghanistan three times. I don't know what I would have done if anything had happened to him. It would have been terrible. But he wasn't married.

I: When he joined the army ...?

R: No, he went into the [Royal] Air Force.

I: Okay.

R: He was in there for eight years. He's out now. He works in London. But no, there are a lot of young widows about with children and they need assistance. I mean alright, probably people think, "Well, you marry again". Maybe you do, but you haven't abandoned your first marriage. You haven't abandoned your children. You've still got them. Also, you've got the life that you could have had and you didn't have, you know, because alright it was my choice to get married young, but I do think that my youth was robbed because being left a widow and left at twenty-one to fend for myself with no man in the background. I mean and you don't realise until they're not there that you are so much on your own, you know.

I: How did it make you feel when your grandson joined the RAF?

R: I don't know whether the Iraq war was on then when he joined. I can't quite remember, but I do remember listening to the news one day and they were supposed to not be able to reach the airport. And the news that they had sent ... they had shelled the airport. I thought, "Paul, oh my god". You know, "Paul's there", and he lost two of his mates. No, his mother was, oh gosh, she was nearly a nervous wreck, my daughter, yes. I can't quite remember. I probably thought, well it's something.

I mean my two granddaughters took both of them with soldiers now, long-serving soldiers, I mean that's their career. That's what they do, you know. Both men have been to Iraq and Afghanistan, but I just hope we don't get involved anywhere else. I think we've learned our lesson maybe to stay away. We can't sort out the world.

I: You said in the very beginning that when you got the letter that your first husband was killed in the war that you never think it's going to happen to you. Do you think that's what your [grand]daughters are thinking? You said they are both with long-serving soldiers.

I: Probably. Well, there isn't a war, is there, at the moment. Although, my granddaughter, she was with him when he went to Iraq, so the war was still on then. He was gone for six months. The only thing is now they've got their mobile phones. You have contact, you see, and that makes an awful lot of difference that contact. I mean he used to be able to ring her from Iraq, even with the war going on. So, she sort of knew, still had contact, which we didn't have.

All we had was a letter, which sometimes was held up. I had got a parcel for Harry. I was getting this parcel to send for him ... some chocolate, which was on ration, and all sorts of things in this parcel which I sent out to him. It arrived the day after he died. I always felt, you know, it seems so awful that he never got that. Because a lot went into that parcel to send him and he never got it.

R: Do you remember what you put in it?

I: I know it was chocolate, and I think it was some toiletries ... things that I knew that you couldn't get, and even I had difficulty getting at the time. Also, we were growing tomatoes in the garden. I sent him a little tomato in there that we had grown. And the officer when he wrote, he said that he had distributed it in the hospital. But that was no consolation to

me because he never knew that. We went to all that to send him that nice parcel and he never got it.

I: So, one thing we glossed over a little bit, Bernice, is that it sounds like you have children with your second husband. Could you give us a little family tree of what your family looks like now?

R: Now? Yes, there's Tim. He's the eldest, then there's Susan, and there's Jennifer.

I: These were with your second husband?

R: My second husband. With Bernard, I have three grandchildren. Three ... eight great-grandchildren. With Tim, Tim has no children. Susan had three children, and I have one great-grandchild there. And Jennifer had two girls, and she has two grandsons. So, I have four children, eight grandchildren, eleven great-grandchildren and I have one great-great-grandchild, and that's the photo ... I've got a photo up there with all the generations.

I: So, you have a very big family now.

R: Yes, I've got a lot of family. Yes.

I: It sounds like you see them all regularly?

I: I do see them. I always see Susan on a Sunday, and if Susan's away, ether Lucia or Anna Marie, her daughters, one or the other, will come and we'll go for a meal or something. Jennifer always comes on a Tuesday. Tim comes down every so often. Or he'll come down and take me up to stay with them. Bernard's coming June 10th. And his daughter from Ireland's coming over. She has three children. She unfortunately has lost her husband. And his other daughter, who lives in America, she was over last year, and she obviously came to see me. They all come to see me, yes. Oh yes. I think they think I'm going to be here forever. If I say anything to Lucia ... I said something one day and I said, "Well, I might not be here". So, she said, "Why granny, where are you going?" I don't think they can't see the day they haven't got me around". I don't come from a long-living family, no.

R: That's wonderful though. It sounds like you are all very close.

I: Oh, we're very close. Very, very close. Susan, they have a boat. We go down there and she does lunch. Every now and, again, the whole family get together down there. We all meet, usually on my birthday they all come down. The two families get on very, very well. The cousins all love to meet. There's no hard feeling anywhere in our family. To me, I love it. I love to see the grandchildren, and the cousins all getting together.

R: So, when you're not seeing your big family, what else does life hold these days?

I: Well, I do get out to have a game of cards. I go to whist drives. I go to bridge drive. Now, I have to rely on a lift because, as I said, I let my car go a year ago. I might have been a bit hasty, but I don't think I was. I think I was coming to the end. I didn't want to be one of those people that have an accident, and I thought, you could do at my age. You know, you could have a giddy moment or something. But now I rely on lifts, and on a Wednesday afternoon I go and play bridge, and there's a chap that I know who used to run a whist drive, and he comes well out of his way to come and pick me up to take me into Canterbury. Thursday night there's a couple who live in Dover. They come right out

of their way to pick me up to go to crib. I've known them for years. I knew them when their children were little.

Then, locally, there's a lady who gives me a lift, but if she's away there's another two people who come. They live in Herne Bay, which is out of the way, and they will come and pick me up. I do rely on being picked up now, but if I can I go out for a game of cards. Sometimes, on a Saturday, if I know I'm not going out and I think it's going to be a long ... I would go on the bus into Canterbury, and just do a little bit of shopping, just round where the bus is. Then, if I feel ok, I will come back on the bus, but if I don't I will get a taxi and come back. But I do get out. Friday afternoon I walk down to the village. They have bridge in the village. They have bridge, which is quite nice. But I've always been one to get out. I'm not very good ... I'm not a granny that sits in the corner doing her knitting. I've never done that.

I: But you're not going dancing anymore?

R: No, I don't dance anymore. No, that went with my youth, I'm afraid, the dancing.

I: Bernice, is there anything else that you would like to talk about, anything more you would like to reflect on that we've not had a chance to talk about?

R: No, I don't think so. I don't know whether there's anything I've left ... I was going to show you [the letters and photographs] ... They might trigger something, but I don't think so.

This is the letter that came from the sergeant to tell me he had died.

I: Right, so this was the first.

R: That's the letter that told me he had gone.⁵

I: This might be a bit too difficult, and tell me if it is, but would you like to read it for us?

R: I can do.

I: Yes?

R: "It is with deep regret that I write this letter to you about the death of your husband. In the day when we were at Anzio, under very trying times, your husband asked me if anything happened to him would I write to you, as in those days I was responsible" – I think that says.

"I promised I would, but hoped I would never have to. That was months ago and had forgotten my promise until I got the news of his death. He was killed about 5PM on the 5th September and he is being buried today at 2PM. In due course I believe you will receive ... a photo of the cemetery and its whereabouts. This is not a job that I like and you can hardly find words to express my sorrow for you. One day after I am near your home, I will call and tell you how you how he came to this tragic end. In the meantime I must remain ...". His name was ... "All his comrades wish to express their deepest sympathy."

That was the letter I got.

⁵ See Fig. 3.

I: Did he ever come?

R: No, he never came. No. Well, you see I moved away, probably, so. And this ...Bernard used to scribble over everything. He was writing to his Daddy. That's ... everything Bernard writing on everything.

This is ...

"I must apologise for not writing to you before this, but circumstances have prevented my doing so. However, I do want you to know how sorry I was to hear of your husband in such tragic circumstances. He was one of my best motorcyclists and has [done] some excellent work at Anzio, especially he was most valuable and could carry out his duties in a manner above reproach. I can assure you that he is missed, not only by myself, but all the RASC chaps here. I believe my commanding officer has written to you, but I wanted to stop to write as Harry was under my immediate command as transport officer. I knew what a great blow the news must have been to you, but can assure you that he could not have suffered in any way. I realise that mere words cannot mean a great deal, but I hope that you will have courage and hope to carry on looking at your husband did his job and that his death will not have been in vain. Most of the company attended the funeral in a small cemetery and in quite a pretty spot. A parcel came a few days ago and, on the suggestion of the colonel, I am distributing the contents to the patients in the nearby hospital. I do hope you will approve of this. I am returning your receipt and the letter enclosed. I do hope that you are keeping well, also your two dear little boys. Their photographs I have seen."⁶

That was ... I don't know what his name is.

I: I think it says it on the front, doesn't it?

R: Captain ...

I: Is it S. C Mills?

R: Mills, oh yes.

I: So, this came a couple of months after your husband passed away.

R: Yes.

I: He says he enclosed the letter that you sent with the parcel.

R: Yes.

I: Did you get that back?

R: Yes. All his letters came back.

I: Have you still got that one?

R: No. I've only kept one letter. I went into hospital, and I got rid of all my letters. I didn't want anyone else to read them. I kept one, yes.

I: Just for you.

⁶ See Fig. 4a and Fig. 4b.

R: Just for me. One. The one with the poem he wrote. I don't know where that is. He wrote a poem he had done about Anzio. The last words were, "once a year at Anzio time" ... something "Remember once a year at Anzio time, the one I love so dear", or something to those words.

I: **That's lovely.**

R: It was lovely.

I: **That's the one you kept.**

R: Yes, I kept that one. Yes.

I: **Do you want to show me what's in these?**

R: Yes. There's not a lot in here because it won't interest you, because this is Bernard's, all Bernard's stuff. For Bernard, our sort of family. That was his will that he left me, but

Oh, that came ... In the war, we had some little wooden trains came for the boys from Australia, and that was the letter that they sent from Australia. They were for children who had lost their father's. They said they were making these toys.⁷

I: **Did your boys like them?**

R: Yes, well, they were really nice little wooden trains.

I: **Would you like to read it?**

R: I can do.

"We were very pleased to hear that our toy trains had arrived in England safely and that it had been means of giving a little pleasure to some of the children of Britain, who we can quite appreciate for various reasons would have had a very poor Christmas, so far as toys are concerned. I must explain that we are a group of fellows who during the war comprised our local ARP [Air Raid Precautions] organisation and who for want of something to do, in what little spare time we had, decided to support the appeal being made by our local lord mayor. We made 75 of these train sets and have been quite pleased with the number of letters we have received from children and their parents. With the reading of some of these letters came a deeper realisation of just how bad things in Britain must be at this time. We have decided that each of these friends of ours ... " – oh, wait a minute – "over there who writes in acknowledgement of having received a toy will be the means of enabling us to do a little more. We are only too well aware that the people of Britain took the brunt of the war, and that we in Australia owe much to them for the fact that we here can be that they live in comparative comfort. We have then posted to you a parcel of food with our best wishes. We hope that for a few days at least it will mean a little improvement in the scanty and monotonous diet which you people over there have to contend with. So that the pleasure of hearing from our friends in England may be shared among all of us here, should you be good enough to acknowledge receipt of your parcel, we would ask you to address your letter to"

Of course, I wrote to them when they got their toys. They did, they sent a parcel. It was tinned butter and some jam, I think, something like that.

⁷ See Fig. 5.

I: Were you glad when the food and the train had arrived?

R: Oh yes, because it was so monotonous.

This is from the ... Harry belonged to the Oddfellows, and they did give me a little bit of money at one time. They made a sort of collection. I don't think I can read that. I don't think it's –

I: We can take a picture of it –

R: Yes.

I: – if you like. So, that came not too long after you husband died.

R: No. And of course it came from Loose, where Harry grew up. I think that's all I've got in there to

Oh, that was the official [letter] ...

I: So, it's literally a form of blanks. It doesn't say your name.

R: No. No. Nothing personal about it at all. It was almost –

I: No, it's just fill in the options, wasn't it.

R: Yes. But it was "Madam". I was his wife, at least they could have said that, you know.

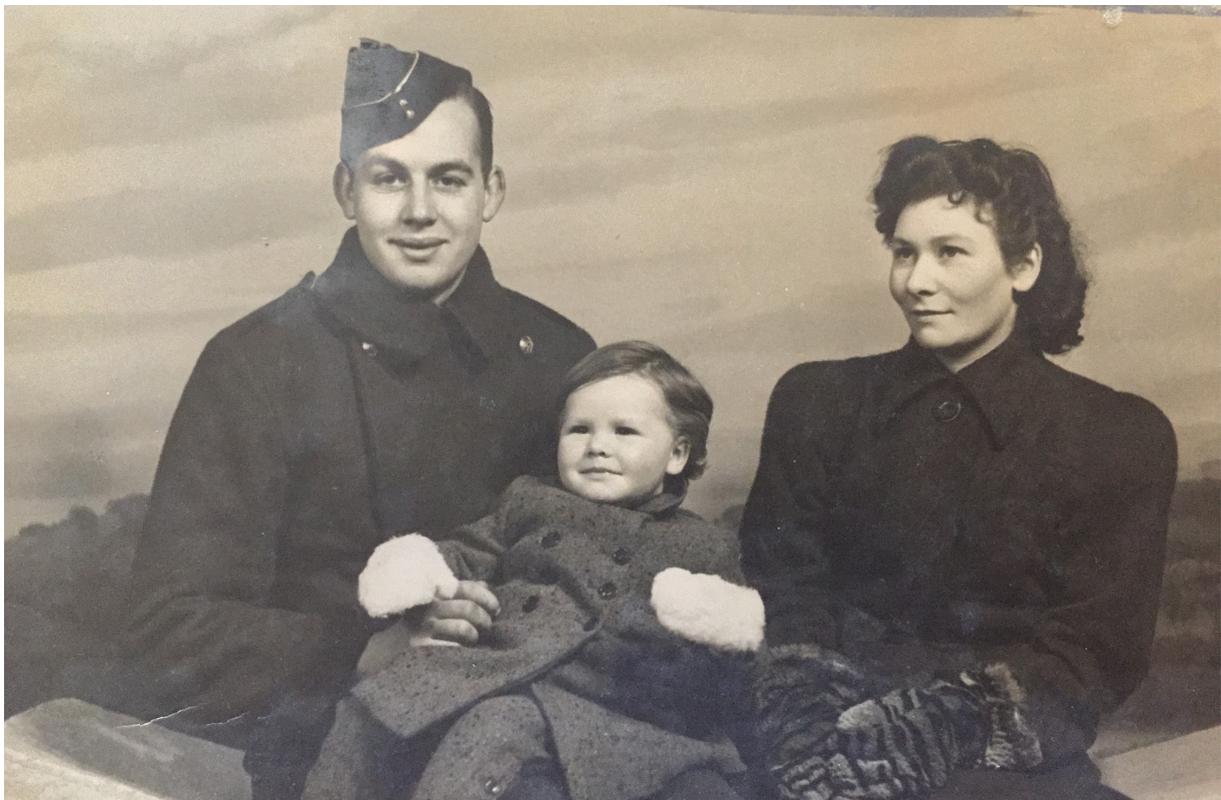


Fig. 1: Harry Golding, Bernice, and their first-born son, Bernard (middle). C. 1941.



Fig. 2: Bernice Bartlett with a photograph of her first husband, Harry Golding, who died in Italy during the Second World War. 12 May 2017.

1/5490949

Sgt. R. Huckfield
RASC

3rd Field Ambulance
C.M.F.
6-9-44

Dear Mrs. Golding,

It is with deep regret that I write this letter to you, about the death of your husband. In the day when we were at Anzio under very trying times, you asked me if anything happened to him would I write to you, as in those days he was my responsibility. I promised I would ^{write} let you know I would never have to. That was some months ago and had forgotten my promise until I got the news of his death. He was killed about 5 PM on the 5 of Sept and he is being buried today at 2 PM. In due course I believe you

will receive a plot of the cemetery and its whereabouts. This is not a job that I like and one can hardly find words to express their sorrow for you. One day when I am near your home, I will call in and tell you how he came to this tragic end, in the mean time I must remain

Your sincere friend
R. Huckfield

P.S. All his comrades wish to express their deepest sympathy for you

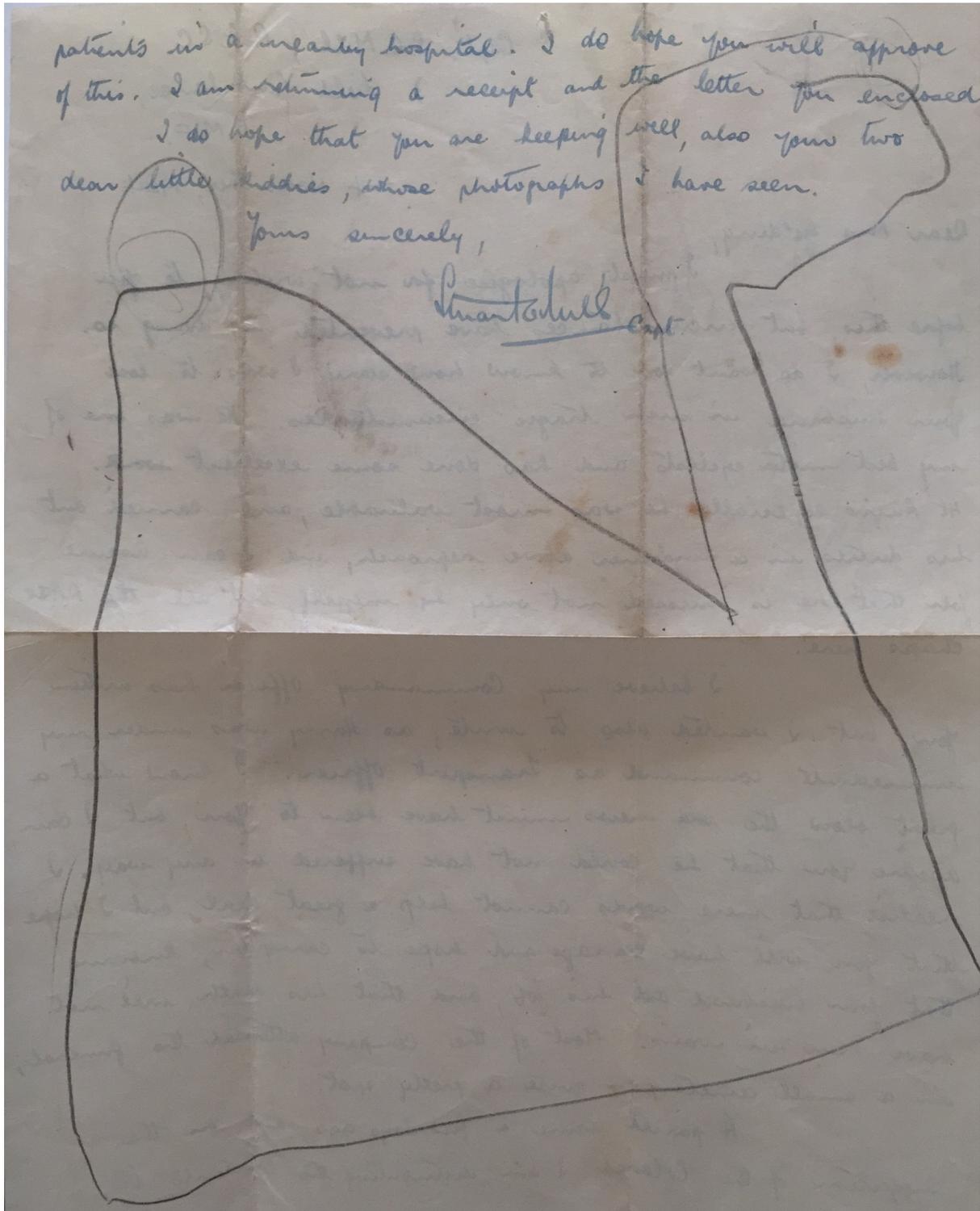


Fig. 4b: Letter from Captain S. C. Mills to Bernice Bartlett (then Golding). With drawings by Bernice's and Harry's first-born son, Bernard. 4 November 1944. Page 2 of 2.

Transcript:

"Dear Mrs Golding,

I must apologise for not writing to you before this, but circumstances have prevented my doing so. However, I do want you to know how sorry I was to lose your husband in such tragic circumstances. He was one of my best motor cyclists, and has done some excellent work. At Anzio especially he was most valuable, and carried out his

duties in a manner above reproach, and I can assure you that he is missed not only by myself, but all the RASC chaps here.

I believe my Commanding Officer has written to you, but I wanted also to write, as Harry was under my immediate command as Transport Officer. I know what a great blow the sad news must have been to you, but I can assure you that he could not have suffered in any way. I realise that mere words cannot help a great deal, but I hope that you will have courage and hope to carry on, knowing that your husband did his job, and that his death will not have been in vain. Most of the company attended the funeral in a small cemetery in quite a pretty spot.

A parcel came a few days ago, and on the suggestion of the Colonel I am distributing the contents to the patients in a nearby hospital. I do hope you will approve of this. I am returning a receipt and the letter you enclosed.

I do hope that you are keeping well, also your two dear little kiddies, whose photographs I have seen.

Yours sincerely,

Stuart C. Mills Capt.

15 Percy Street,
BALWYN, E.8.,
Melbourne, Victoria,
Australia.

17th April, 1946.

Dear Mrs. Golding,

We were very pleased to hear that our toy trains had arrived in England safely and that they had been the means of giving a little pleasure to some of the children of Britain, who we can quite appreciate for various reasons would have had a very poor Christmas so far as toys were concerned.

I must explain that we are a group of fellows who during the war comprised our local A. R. P. Organisation and who for want of something to do in what little spare time we had decided to support the Appeal being made by our local Lord Mayor. We made 75 of these train sets and have been quite pleased with the number of letters we have received from children and their parents.

With the reading of some of these letters came a deeper realisation of just how bad things in Britain must be at this time. We have decided then that each of those friends of ours over there who writes in acknowledgment of having received a toy will be the means of enabling us to do a little more. We are only too well aware of the fact that the people of Britain took the brunt of the war and that we in Australia owe much to them for the fact that we here can today live in comparative comfort.

We have then posted to you a parcel of food with our best wishes. We hope that for a few days at least it will mean a little improvement in the scanty and monotonous diet which you people over there have to contend with.

So that the pleasure of hearing from our friends in England may be shared among all of us here, should you be good enough to acknowledge receipt of your parcel, we would ask you to address your letter to:

Mr. Keith Hirons,
21 Bryson Street,
CANTERBURY, E. 7., Melbourne,
Victoria, Australia.

Yours sincerely,

G. T. Collins
(G. T. Collins)

Fig. 5: Letter from Mr. Keith Hirons to Bernice Bartlett (then Golding). The letter accompanied a food parcel containing, among other things, jam. For Christmas 1945, the group had sent Bernice and her sons (and other families) a wooden toy train. 17 April 1946.

No. CD/10693742
(If replying, please quote above No.)

Army Form B. 104-82.

R.A.S.C. Record Office,

HASTINGS.

19 September, 1944.

Madam.

It is my painful duty to inform you that a report has been received from the War Office notifying the death of:—

(No.) T.10693742 (Rank) Driver.

(Name) GOLDING, H.T.

(Regiment) R.A.S.C.

which occurred whilst serving with the British forces
in the Central Mediterranean
on the 5th. September, 1944.

The report is to the effect that he was killed in action.

I am to express the sympathy and regret of the Army Council.

I am to add that any information that may be received as to the soldier's burial will be communicated to you in due course, by the Directorate of Graves Registration and Enquiries, War Office (A.G.13), 32 Grosvenor Gardens, S.W.1, to whom all enquiries with regard to graves or places of burial should be addressed.

I am,

Madam,

Your obedient Servant,

J. Malone

Officer in Charge of Records, for

Fig. 6: The official letter from the Record Office notifying Bernice of her husband's death, written exactly two weeks after Harry's passing. 19 September 1944.



War Widows' Stories

History. Memories. Heritage.

An Interview with Jeannie Benjamin

24 July 2017

Conducted by Nadine Muller



The War Widows'
Association
of Great Britain



LOTTERY FUNDED



heritage
lottery fund



LIVERPOOL
JOHN MOORES
UNIVERSITY

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To do so, and for any other questions about this interview, how you may use it, or about the project, please contact Dr Nadine Muller via email (info@warwidowsstories.org.uk), or by post at the following addressing: John Foster Building, Liverpool John Moores University, 80-98 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, L3 5UZ.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

I = Interviewer

R = Respondent / Interviewee

[] = Clarification note

I: So, today is the 24th of July 2017, and I'm interviewing Jeannie Benjamin. Jeannie, could you tell me your age, please?

R: I'm 73. I'm nearly 74.

I: Thank you. So, Jeannie, do you want to tell me a little bit about who this interview is about today?

R: It's about my mother, who was a war widow. She was married to my father. Her name was Margaret Elizabeth Benjamin, but always known as Betty, as far as I knew. She was married to my father, who was Eric Arthur Benjamin, and she was widowed in 1945, just before the end of the Second World War.

I: Can I take you back a little bit, Jeannie? What do you know about your parents' childhood, upbringing, where they grew up? Can you tell me a little bit about that?

R: I know quite a lot about my mother's upbringing. A little less about my father's. My mother wrote down her life story to be read by me and my sister after she had died, and we found it the day after she'd died. So, that was quite a find, and she left a letter with it as well, for me and my sister to read. So that's why I know quite a lot about how she was brought up. And I've been recently researching some of my father's childhood because I've just started writing a book about his life. So that's quite an interesting research project.

My mother was born in Wales, I think, yes, and she had quite a poor, hard life. Her father was training to be a mining engineer, but he had to give it up when his father died, so he could help his mother look after the rest of her family. Because he had six sisters, or seven sisters. So he then just became a miner. So he was a coal miner in Wales. And my mother talked about how hard up they were, and how one day somebody gave my grandfather some money to put on a horse – it was about two and sixpence in old money – but they spent it on food for the family. And then, luckily, they found that the horse was unplaced, so they all breathed a sigh of relief. So that's the kind of context that she grew up in.

And then ... that's right ... when my grandfather's father died, the mother came and had them all baptized as Catholics. Because my grandmother was a Baptist, but,

nevertheless, my grandfather's mother insisted they all become Catholics. So they were then packed off to a boarding school in Hereford and did all the Catholic stuff. But then they all moved to St Alban's. Again, that's a Catholic school with nuns and everything. And my grandfather only saw them intermittently because he had to work elsewhere, and every time he came back he brought a Toblerone with him. My mother never knew why, but it was a big occasion when he used to come back at weekends on a motorbike with a Toblerone. She writes all that in her book, which is quite interesting.

And then they moved back to Twickenham, which is where I grew up later on. And then he got a job as a petrol pump attendant, and he eventually managed to own the garage. So that was quite interesting. He was a Communist, he was a paid-up member of the Communist Party, and my mother was always very embarrassed and ashamed about that [laughter], which I've never quite understood why. So that was the context of her childhood.

And then she met my father in 1937, and she writes in her little, few pieces of paper, how that, when she first saw him, he was striding down Teddington High Street in his Sea Scout uniform, looking all fit and scrubbed and tanned, and immediately fell in love with him. That was quite romantic, really. And she said they got engaged and expected to get married sometime in the long-distant future. And he, then, joined the RAF [Royal Airforce] Volunteer Reserve, specifically to save up money to get married. But she said, then, that the war changed everything, and they actually got married much sooner. The war started in September 1939 and they got married in December 1939.

And then there was quite a story to their wedding as well because the date was set for December 2nd, but the Registrar didn't turn up. And my mother's sister, who was meant to be a bridesmaid, got whisked off to hospital with peritonitis. So all the guests – they couldn't have the wedding – all the guests had to go back to my grandmother's house. And there's a picture of them in all the national papers, cutting the cake, even though they're not married. And the papers blamed all this on the fact that my mother wore a green dress, and this was meant to be unlucky. So the headline was, "The Bride Wore Green" [laughter], and that was quite interesting, you know. It went down in the family annals, as it would.⁸

So then, after that, my mother ... I think she stayed up in Lincoln in a flat with my father for a while. But then I was born, and I was born, actually, in a maternity home for RAF officers' wives, in Fulmer Chase, which is near Stoke Poges in Buckinghamshire. And my father wrote a poem when I was born. Well, he wrote it, actually, in the months leading up to when I was born, and then the final bit is when I was born. So that always makes me quite emotional when I read that. But, it's a very special thing to have, and I'm very pleased.

I: Can I take you back a little bit to the war, as far as education?

R: Yes.

I: What did your mum do just before she met your father?

R: Yes, thank you for that. Yes ... She was at that boarding school in St Albans, and she talks about the nuns being kind, but the girls and boys always kept very separate. And she has a memory of one of the girls walking around the yard with a sheet over her head because she'd wet the bed. So, you know, "It wasn't all sweetness and light," as she said. Yeah, that's right ... She left school at fourteen and went to work. I think it was a

⁸ See Fig. 2 and Fig. 3

shoe shop or something, but she was the cashier. This was in Kingston, and they lived in Twickenham. And she said she used to cycle every day to work and back, and very long hours. And then spend some hours cashing-up in the evening, doing the books. But then she used to cycle home to have lunch, cycle back again, and on Saturdays, after she'd finished cashing up, she used to go dancing. [Laughter] And she says, "I don't know how I had the energy." But you do when you're young, don't you?

I: So this would have been in the early mid-30s?

R: That would have, yes, it would have. Because she was born in 1918. My father was born in 1919. She was a year older. And my father, he went to Hampton Grammar School, so he had a slightly better education, but he went to work for an insurance company. He was one of four boys, but one of his brothers was killed in a motorbike accident when he was 25. Which I have reflected on since, and I thought, my father was fifteen when his brother, aged 25, died. And little did he know that ten years later he would, himself, die. I just always make those connections, but I never thought about that until recently when I was looking up stuff to write about him. Yes ... Where was I?

I: Your father's work...

R: Yeah, he was an insurance clerk, but then ... that's right ... because he went into the RAF Volunteer Reserve. Oh yes, in a letter to his aunt and uncle in Canada he writes, "I've just joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve, and I have to tell you there is no greater sport than flying". Which I'm going to use as the title for the book about him because that's quite nice, I think. So he joined up and then, quite soon after that, he was called up when the war started. As he was in the Volunteer Reserve, he was then called up to the RAF.⁹ So that's why my mum said the war changed everything, and it expedited their marriage.

I: So what happened from there, Jeannie?

R: Well, they married in 1939, and I've got all the letters – well a lot of the letters – that my father wrote to my mother during the war. And they're lovely love letters, and I'm going to use them as the basis for my book. Because, you know, I want everyone to read them. And some people have said to me, "But surely, they're private". And yes, but they're a wonderful document to the love that they had for each other. I mean, it's a shame I haven't got any of my mother's letters to him, but I haven't. I found all these letters in her house, tied up in a shoe box after she had died, so that was quite interesting to read.

What was I going to say about the letters? ... Yes, in the letters that he wrote to her, he always signed ... his name was Eric, but he always signed his name "John". And my sister and I never found out why. We just knew that that was the case. I don't remember ever asking my mother why. It was so strange. But anyway, that was his name, and I know that if I'd been a boy I was going to be called John. Interesting. Anyway, they're very lovely letters, and it does give you a taste of how it was in the war when he was, you know, going out on missions and coming back. And, oh yes, he refers to their phone calls. They used to phone each other up and they were, you know, always very, very special times. So, it was all very nice.

And the last letter that he wrote is written on 19th February 1945, and later that night he was killed. So, I've thought this since, my mother must have received that letter after he'd gone missing.

⁹ See Fig. 4.

I: Did your mother talk about that time when your father was away in the war, and what it was like for her?

R: Yes, but, you know, she used to say that they'd had a good war, you know. A lot of people said that. Because it's true, they were off to dances and things, and she talked about carrying me in the carrycot off to the Mess dances. She loved dancing and, yes, they had a good time. So, it was a shame, you know, he didn't quite make it. Just before the end of the war he was killed.

Yes, and in that document that she wrote, as I said, she talks about the black, black days and nights after that. Because he was posted missing. I'll just go back a bit because one night, it was when there was the fall of France, and she wrote about it in this life story of hers. But he came back that night, just appeared unexpectedly, and the next morning he answered the door, and there was a telegram saying that he was missing. And so they laughed, you know, they thought ... But then she says sometime later, "The telegram came, and it was for real". So that was quite poignant, the way she put that. So, do you want me to talk about the night that he died?

I: Or, perhaps, before we come to that, can you go back to when you were born?

R: Yes.

I: You said your dad wrote a poem?

R: Yes.

I: And it was leading up to that.

R: Yes, he did, in the months, saying ... And it's relevant to the war. It's all about all the battle of war going on, and this innocent life coming into the world. Which was lovely. And then, the last line is, "And on this day," I can't remember exactly, something about, "And Jeannie came into the world. There was never a greater day." And I thought, "That's brilliant", isn't it?¹⁰

I: Yes.

R: Yes.

I: And he wrote that whilst he was away?

R: I suppose so, yes. Because he wasn't there the exact day I was born, no. And my mother used to say that my aunt, at least one of my aunts, came cycling over, and they all came and fussed around me. My family was a great support to my mother, and we grew up surrounded by aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents. [Laughter] So yeah, I was born, and I was eighteen months old when he died. So, I've got a few pictures of me with him, sitting on his lap and things. So I did know him, but I don't really remember. And I've been told things, and now I don't know whether it's a memory or whether I just remember being told things.

But I do know there was something about the smell of his RAF jacket. Because much later, when I had a temporary boyfriend, I remember walking along Hampton Court and it was raining, and he gave me his jacket. And there was something about the smell of that jacket that brought it all back to me, which was very interesting. Because I was well

¹⁰ See Fig. 5a and Fig. 5b.

in my teens by then. But the smell was so evocative. I used to go to bed with a piece of wool round my nose and smelling it. I don't know if that's anything to do with it, but it was called "my necessary". I had to have that. [Laughter]

Anyway, where was I? Yes, I was eighteen months old, so I had some memories. But my sister was born just three weeks before my father was killed. And there's one photograph in the family album that my mother put in, with all four of us together. And it's the only one. And she's got curly, wavy lines all round it, you know, saying, "All four of us". Because that was taken when he was on leave after my sister, Sally, was born. It was just before he went back and was killed. So very poignant, that photograph.¹¹

And, you know, only since I grew up did I know what that must have been like for my mother, you know, when you've just had a baby and you've got an eighteen-months-old toddler as well, and your husband's just gone missing. He wasn't confirmed dead for months, but she kind of knew. She was hoping and hoping, but she knew also. But then, as she said in her kind of memoir that she wrote, "From then on, my life centred round my two little girls, my pride and joy", she says. And she did. We were her life.

I: So what do you know of the day that the telegram arrived? Did your mother ever talk to you about that?

R: Yes, and I've got a vague memory of seeing it, but I don't have it now. No, she didn't really say a lot about the actual day. No. I've got another telegram – well, no, that's a letter – from the Ministry of Defence, a few years later, saying that she could go up and collect his DFC [Distinguished Flying Cross] and Bar from King George VI. But children under five weren't allowed, or something. So, she must have gone to ... I know she did go to collect it, but I don't know who went with her.

I: Do you know anything about the circumstances of your dad going missing, or ...?

R: Oh yes, he was a Master Bomber, so he used to lead the pathfinders and drop flares. And he was doing that in a raid over a town called Böhlen, B-Ö-H-L-E-N, which was near Leipzig, and he was trying to destroy an oil plant there. He went under the cloud cover, apparently, rather dangerously, and was hit by flak and was shot down. He was flying a Mosquito, and there were only him and his navigator in the plane. They're small planes. He used to fly Lancasters as well, but Mosquitoes, I understand, went out ahead and did the ... Very dangerously, as I read somewhere in a book about pathfinders. The pathfinders were considered the elite. But he, as a Master Bomber, was kind of the elite of the elite, it says in this book. Which, you know ... I was always brought up knowing he was a hero, so that didn't surprise me.

So he was shot down there, and I've found out since that he was buried in the Colditz cemetery. I've got a picture of his original grave, which is a very makeshift affair with his name and number on. His number, by the way, was 77777, which turned out not to be as lucky as you might expect. And then, anyway, I found out also that his body was exhumed and taken to Berlin, and now he's buried in the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery. And I've been there since. I didn't go there until 2005 with my sister, but I had seen it. My mother went there in 1987 with her second husband, Fred, and it was paid for by the Royal British Legion. So that was the only time she saw the grave as well.

I: During the time leading up to your father's death, you already said you were eighteen months when it happened. Was your mother working? You said you had

¹¹ See Fig. 6.

a big, extended family. I'm just trying to imagine what everyday life was like for those of you ...

R: Yes. I know she had a job in the National Physical Laboratory in Teddington, but that was being cut short because she became pregnant again, with my sister. Apparently, I don't like this expression, but she said it was an accident. I hate that kind of thing. Anyway, my sister was very loved as well. Yes, so she didn't have many jobs. She was too young, really. Although she did later on, when we were growing up. She was the school welfare assistant. And so I think that's partly where my feminism comes from because I had a working mother who, you know, supported the family. But she did have an RAF pension, of course.

I don't remember us being short of money. We had holidays. We went to a holiday camp in North Wales called Prestatyn, I remember. We went to the Isle of Wight. And we had a couple of holidays in France because my mother's brother married a Frenchwoman, and we knew people over there. So we always had enough money. And I remember, every now and again she'd get a big cheque, like for £100 or something enormous like that! And we'd go off to Kingston and buy clothes. It was great. But she wasn't very good at managing it because I do remember her going 'round to my grandfather's and asking for a post-dated cheque. I knew what that was when I was quite young. [Laughter.] So, you know, we were alright.

I grew up originally in a prefab in Hounslow. We moved there from my grandmother's house after my father was killed. So we lived there until I was about five or six, and then we moved to a council flat in east Twickenham, which was a big, old, rambling house called Haversham Grange, which was divided into flats. I had a great childhood. I had a huge, huge garden which led into a wood near the river Thames, and we used to go and camp in there and play out. There was an old bombed house in one corner and we went ... It was very dangerous, but we had a great time. And that was a nice childhood.

Then, when I was about eleven, we moved to the other side of Twickenham, called Carpenters Court, and that was quite a posh council house. [Laughter.] But it must have looked very strange because my sister and I were going off to a private school every day in our little posh uniforms from this council flat. But that was paid for by the RAF Benevolent Fund. So my whole education was paid for by them. Then we went to St Catherine's Convent School in Twickenham, from the age of five 'til seventeen. And my sister and I always felt a bit embarrassed because we always had two reports: everyone else only had one, but we had one for my mother, and one to send off to the RAF Benevolent Fund to show that we were doing well. [Laughter.]

I: So your first memories ... Are they from when you and your mother and your sister lived with your grandmother?

R: I can't really remember that. They were more like when we were at the prefab.

I: And were the reports good?

R: Oh, of course, yes. No, they were actually. [Laughter.] Mine was slightly better than my sister's, if I'm honest. [Laughter.] Yes, we worked hard. And then I went ... because that was for single-sex ... I went to a single-sex teacher training college: Digby Stuart in Roehampton. And then I taught in primary schools, which were mostly women, and then I went on to do special needs teaching, again mostly women. And after 21 years of teaching then I changed my career, and I went to work for UNISON, the trade union, as the regional women's officer for the south-east of England. So again, all to do with women. And, you know, I'm a feminist. What else could I do?

So, it's interesting. I mean, I wouldn't have been the person that I am if my father hadn't died, and if my mother hadn't been the kind of person she was.

I: What are some of your, I suppose, everyday memories of growing up with your mother? And without your father?

R: Well, it was normal, you know, children at school, when they mentioned their father and I said, "Oh, I haven't got a father," they would say, "Ooh, I'm sorry". And I thought, "Why are they sorry?", you know, it's just normal, it's just a fact. It was just what we knew. I remember my mother said that when Sally was little she said, "Why haven't we got a daddy?" And she apparently said, "Well, you have, but he's in heaven". So, just little snippets like that, really.

She was pretty strong, really. She had boyfriends, yes, and one of them I particularly liked because he bought me a dog. [Laughter.] But then she didn't. She chucked him over. And then she met Fred, who became ... well, I call him my stepfather, but we never lived with them as a couple. But he was, technically. He was a very solid, bluff kind of guy, and she broke up with him lots of times, and then he came back again. So I knew him all through my childhood from the age of nine. But she never married him until my sister and I had both left home, and she told us [it was] because she would have lost her RAF pension. So very mercenary reasons, you know, but understandable.

I: Did you get to keep the dog?

R: [Laughter.] I did keep the dog, but it did die eventually. And oh, I was so upset, so upset. It was called Patsy.

I: So the boyfriend left, but the dog stayed.

R: Yes. [Laughter]. Yes, that's alright. I think you can put your mind at rest. And the dog had a puppy, that's right, it was called Toby. And my sister's eldest child is called Toby – I don't know if that's got anything to do with it. [Laughter.]

I: So you said that, obviously, you had a happy childhood and you remember going on holidays.

R: Yes.

I: And you sound as though you don't particularly remember your mother really struggling.

R: Not financially, no, no. No, she did have lots of admirers, but I think, you know, we were always put first. We never felt our nose was out of joint when she had a boyfriend or two, no. And she'd ... yes?

I: And did I get that right ... She was working?

R: As a school welfare assistant.

I: Yeah, and raising you.

R: Yes.

I: And then she also got a pension, didn't she?

R: Yes.

I: Did she have to supplement that?

R: Oh, I think so, yes. Yes. We weren't rich but I never remember any money worries. If she had them, she kept them to herself.

I: Did she talk to you about your father?

R: Oh yes, lots, yes.

I: What did she ...?

R: She told me I look like him. Oh yes. I mean, he was a hero in the whole family. All my aunts and uncles, you know ... He was the ... You know when people die, there's the ... I mean, he never had any faults. He must have done but, as far as I'm concerned, he didn't. He was always praised to high heaven, and little snippets of what they remember him saying about, he obviously got on well with his mother-in-law, my mother's mother. Which is surprising because she was a bit of a cantankerous woman [laughter]. And there was some joke about, she always ate the stale cakes and he ate the fresh ones, you know, it was some poem that he wrote, "Stale cakes for you and fresh cakes for me".

Strange memory. [Laughter.]

And we always had great family get-togethers with all my cousins. We all lived near each other, but Sally and I were the special ones because we didn't have a father. Everybody treated us in a very special way. And so, every week, we were brought up as Catholics, every week after Mass we went 'round to my grandmother's, which was the next road. And we always had Sunday lunch with her. The others didn't. We did because we were the poor little girls who didn't have a father. And we always got pocket money and, you know

I: Were you aware of that at the time?

R: I think –

I: That you were being spoilt?

R: – so, I think so. We felt that we had a closer bond with my grandparents than the others did because they all had fathers and things.

But our uncles were lovely. They always treated us very specially as well. Very nice. There was my mother's brother, who was obviously a blood uncle, but the others were married to my mother's two sisters. And they were all very nice to us. I mean, at Christmas we all got together and grandfather would dress up as Father Christmas and hand out the presents. All very orderly. [Laughter.]

I: Do you remember having any friends or people who you knew from school who had lost their fathers?

R: No, my ...

I: Or were you the only ones?

R: Well, yes, I seemed to be the only one. All my friends had fathers and when I went 'round to their families, you know, there was a father there. But I do remember one friend whose

father wasn't very nice, and she wasn't very happy. She used to come 'round to our house and say I was lucky because we didn't have a father there. [Laughter.]

I: What did you say to that?

R: Oh, I didn't really think anything of it, I just thought, "Yes, I probably am", you know.

I: Did your mother hear it?

R: I think she was aware, yes. And I also remember another friend being there when I was in my stropky teenage years, and Fred was around, and I was in some big argument. And I shouted at Fred, "Well, you're not my father, anyway", and stormed out. Which must have been really hurtful to him and to my mother, and I think I knew that. I said it deliberately. She had a hard time with me when I was a teenager. [Laughter.]

I: Why is that?

R: Well because I was a rebel. I used to do really wicked things like walk into town with no shoes on. [Laughter.] Which was considered outrageous. [Laughter.]

I: When was this, roughly?

R: Oh, I would have been about sixteen ... fifteen ... something like that.

I: So that was in the very early '60s?

R: Yes, yes, that's right. Or earlier. [Laughter.] Yes.

I: How did you feel at that time, when you were a teenager, a teenage girl? Did you feel any differently then about not having a father? Or not having a father who was there?

R: I don't know, because I didn't know what it was like to have one. It was just how it was. I think I felt it more for my mother and not having any support in helping to bring me up, helping to keep me on the straight and narrow. [Laughter.] Yeah, it's a shame, not to be able to ask her those things now. I think it's common that people wish they'd asked their parents things when they were alive.

I: Did your mother ever talk to you about your childhood? What it was like for her during that time ...

R: No, I can't remember her actually ... No, we didn't do a lot of looking back, really. No. I remember when, in my teens, we were living at Carpenters Court. On a Friday night, somehow, we got into this tradition where she would make lots of bowls of macaroni cheese, or spaghetti cheese. And all the boyfriends and other friends in the neighbourhood knew this, and on a Friday night they'd all come and have some spaghetti cheese. And my mother was the mainstay. And I've met people much later on, some of these friends, who remember her as "Mrs B". They never knew her other name. But, you know, they remember the Friday nights when there was spaghetti cheese.

And then, when we went downstairs to see all the boys off on their bikes and everything, we used to reward them with a kiss, you know. [Laughter.] Very funny. But she was definitely ... She was a very lively person, a strong personality, and lots of laughs and everything. So she wasn't just a mum in the background. She was there, part of the party, you know.

I: So where did things go from there for you and your mother? Where did they go from Jeannie walking into town barefoot –

R: [Laughter.]

I: – and being a stroppy teenager, as you call it? What happened from there with your mother, and also what happened to you?

R: Yeah, well then ... That's when I went to teacher training college. I had a boyfriend from the age of fourteen to the age of 21, and I was going to marry him. But he went to Australia, and I was due to go and follow him and get married to him, but in that time I met somebody else and married him instead. And I'd only known this other person for three months before I decided to marry him. So I was then married for the next 21 years. I got divorced. I'll tell you about that in a minute. But I was married in 1966, when I was 22, and later on that year when I'd just become 23, I gave birth to my son, Dylan. And then 16½ months later, I gave birth to my daughter, Charlotte. So, within two years of getting married I had two children, and that was a bit of a shock. [Laughter.] Yes, a lot of adjustment there.

We were hard up. We moved to Bristol, well, Frampton Cotterell, a little village outside Bristol, and they were hard years. We bought this barn of a house and my now ex-husband was very good at doing houses up, and he made it into a decent house. But it was ... We didn't have a washing machine, we didn't have a fridge, we didn't have a bathroom for ages until he made one. That was tough with washing lots of nappies by hand every day, with two children wearing nappies. It was a struggle.

I: And your mother and your extended family were all still ...?

R: They were all still back in the Twickenham area, yes. But my mother, being the hardy woman that she was, she used to drive over to Bristol. I don't know how old she was then but I'm sure she wasn't old, but it was a long way to drive. And we didn't have a telephone, so she would suddenly appear [Laughter.] So yes, that was because I remember the three-day week, Edward Heath and the three-day week. It meant that electricity was cut off. And she just turned up then. And it was amazing, really, because the only contact we had was letters, and they took days to arrive, and because we didn't have a phone and ... yes.

I: So, you were in your, as you said, in your early 20s, mid-20s, when you had your children.

R: Yes.

I: Your mother would have been just about in her 50s, do you think?

R: Not even that, I don't think, yes. Yes, something like that. So yes, I did feel isolated because my husband, as he was then, was very controlling, and he didn't like my family, basically. And he didn't like me having anything to do with them. It was tough. I did make a go of the marriage as much as I could, but then in later years he became more and more violent, and it was the whole domestic violence thing. So in the end, that was it. So it was tough for my kids when they were in their teens, very tough. We had the police 'round a few times.

And, of course, my mother was really anxious. By then, we were living in Kent, we'd moved from the Bristol area, living in Sevenoaks. And we had this very nice house he'd

built ... made another. He made beautiful houses, I have to say. He was very clever at it. He was the "Do-It-Yourself Man of the Year" on one occasion. Anyway, I had to pay a heavy price for a nice house. On one occasion, when it was getting to the latter phase of the marriage, and he was getting worse, I was on the phone to my mother and he just pulled the phone out of the wall. So she was worried and she called the police because she was a long way away. She was down in Steyning, in Sussex, by then. So the police came round, and it was horrible, and horrible times with my son and daughter experiencing, witnessing it.

I: When your children were first born, did that ever make you draw comparisons of what it must have been like for your mother, when your father died and she had two children?

R: I don't remember thinking that. I think I was too selfish. I don't recall that. Maybe I did, because I can't remember recalling that. I hope I did. Yes, perhaps I did.

I: I suspect your mother was more than happy to make the journey over because she remembered what it was like –

R: Oh, yes.

I: – to be sort of ...

R: She doted on my kids, absolutely doted on them. She was a great grandmother. And they loved her. Every year my husband and I used to take them down to my mother's, who was by then married to Fred, in Steyning. And we used to leave them there for a week, and that was not far from the sea. And we used to tell them it was their special children's holiday because we didn't want them to think we were just abandoning them. But it was special, just for children, this holiday. And they've got great memories of that. It was excellent.

I: So do you know anything about ... I know this might be a bit difficult because it was a difficult period for you, of course, but are you aware of what your mother's life was like when you were first married? What was going on for her? Obviously, she was very anxious about you.

R: Well, no, when I was first married, yes. I got married in 1966. My sister got married in 1967. And she got married to Fred in 1968. And they moved down to Steyning, in Sussex. They were really happy. Really happy. I know they were. And she mentions that in this memoir that she wrote. They got well involved in the community. She was involved with the Catholic Church. Fred wasn't, but they knew loads of people. She used to, in the latter years, she used to help out in an old people's home, she used to take part in a local singing group. She was really part of the local community. And Fred was an artist. He did loads of pictures, paintings, and they used to go out, and he used to paint a picture and she used to do her knitting. They had a really happy 22 years. So that was good.¹²

I: What do you think made her re-marry in 1968?

R: Because we had left home.

I: And did she lose her pension then?

¹² See Fig. 9.

R: Yes, yes. So yes, she was loth to do that, but once we had, I mean ... I think it was just the pension and my sister and I. I don't think it would have worked if Fred had married and moved in. And she knew that, really.

I: And of course, much later on, she would have had her pension reinstated –

R: I don't think ...

I: – according to...

R: Well, I don't think so, unless ... because she was killed in a car crash in 1991. I don't ... What, you mean after...?

I: No, I mean, she died before she would have seen –

R: Oh yes, yes, I suppose.

I: – those new laws.

R: Yeah.

I: Did she ever talk to you about that? Did she have any particular feelings about losing her War Widows' Pension?

R: Yes, well, you know, we were very conscious of the fact that she would have lost it if she'd married Fred. She used to mention that, yes. It was quite a big thing, the money side of it. But she didn't mention it afterwards. She didn't ever say, "Oh dear, I haven't got the pension anymore". In fact, she was always giving us a little bit of money on the side. Because me and my sister, we didn't have a lot of money when we were first married. But she always did it out of Fred's sight. She used to kind of get it out of her back pocket and say, [whisper] "Here's a tenner, don't tell Fred". [Laughter.] It was a bit of a joke.

I: So your mother died in 1991?

R: Yes. Well, yes, I've got quite a lot of stories in my life. Yes, 1991, in April, Fred died of cancer, and she was really, really upset, as she would be. And seven months later she rang me up one night, I was in Sevenoaks, and she rang me and said ... As I said, Fred did all these paintings, she was going to have an exhibition of his paintings and sell some of them off. And she rang me up to say she couldn't go to the exhibition. It was due to take place that next weekend, and she said she couldn't do it, it was too heart-breaking. She decided to call it all off.

And the other thing she said was that the next morning she was going to go to her solicitor and change her will. Because, as it stood, they had mirror wills and it was ... the money was going to go three ways between me, my sister, and Fred's sister, who was obviously quite old then. And my mother said that she wanted it just to go to me and Sally. And she felt a little bit bad about it because she, you know, was Fred's sister, and they had agreed. So she said she was going to go round to Phyllis, Fred's sister, the next day and just check it all out with her, make sure she was okay about it. Because she had quite a lot of money. And then she was going to go to her solicitor. So we had a chat like that.

I'd seen her the week before, by the way, which was quite good. It was my school half-term and she'd come up to Sevenoaks. We'd had a lovely day together, and we'd talked

about her dying, and she said she wasn't afraid of dying when she got old. But, you know, I said, "Well, when the time comes, I'll look after you". I remember having that conversation. I was pleased I had it.

Anyway, a week later she rings me up, and then goes up, next morning, drives to Storrington, which wasn't far away from Steyning, talks to Phyllis. Phyllis, we found this out later, Phyllis had said, "Yeah, that's perfectly alright, I've no trouble with that at all". She waved goodbye to my mother, and then my mother had a crash on the way, before she got to the solicitor. And I think, although I've no evidence to support it, but I'm convinced that she took her mind off the road and she was upset because she felt she was being disloyal to Fred about changing her will. I'm sure of this. Anyway, she swerved across the road a bit and then this lorry just came down and ... and that was it. So she was airlifted and I got a ... The police came round, and anyway ... We got to the hospital, it was Chichester Hospital. We, I say we, and the boyfriend I had at the time – drove down there. I was obviously divorced by then. And anyway, she was in the operating theatre. My sister arrived, my daughter arrived. Anyway, she couldn't be saved.

So obviously, she hadn't changed her will, and there was a load of argy-bargy after that. Because Phyllis then changed her mind and said she would like to claim her bit of the will. Anyway, it kept me busy, with solicitors' letters and things, and we sorted it out in the end.

And the day after that, I went down there and I found this letter that she'd written to us, with her life story attached.

I: How old was she when she died?

R: She was 73, which is the age I am now. And because I'm a bit obsessed with dates, I've now lived ... hang on ... I've now lived four months longer than she lived. And I say this to my children, you know, every day is like something I'm really grateful for. Because time is precious, and she didn't have this time. So I feel I must not waste this time. I've got things to do. And I, you know, I want to use it properly. I mean, she was as lively as I am now. She was driving everywhere, she had loads of energy. She wasn't an old woman at all. So she could still be alive now. She would be 98 or 99 – only just.

And that's why I wrote my book, *It's Not The Same Friday*.¹³ Because people go on thinking, "Oh, it's Friday again, oh, thank goodness it's Friday". But their lives are going on and it's not the same Friday that comes 'round all the time. They're getting older, things are changing, and time is precious.

I: Of course, what your mother did get to see was you divorcing from –

R: Oh yes. She was so happy for me. Yes. She was so pleased. That was great, yes. I'm glad she saw that. Goodness, yes.

I: Do you want to tell me a little bit about what happened after that in your life?

R: After she was killed, or after I got –

I: After you got divorced.

R: – divorced?

¹³ Jeannie Benjamin. *It's Not the Same Friday: A Story of Personal Change* (2014)

I: So when was that?

R: That was 1987. It was the happiest day of my life, honestly. Much happier than my wedding. I remember it so well. I'd moved out of the main house, moved into my nice little house, much smaller house, the other end of Sevenoaks. But it was mine. [Laughter.] And I remember that first night I stood in the doorway. I'd bought a little cassette ... because it was the olden days then, you had cassettes ... with Sting on it, "Every Breath You Take", which was a big record at the time. I had that on the player playing. I had just bought myself a pizza, and it was warming up in the oven. There was the smell of pizza wafting, the music playing, and I had a bottle of red wine. And I thought, "What could be better than this?" [Laughter.] And my cat. I had a cat. I was so happy. [Laughter.] I was free. Yes, I had a good time after that.

I: How about your children?

R: Oh, my daughter couldn't wait for me to get divorced. She was helping me. I mean, she was only ... from the age of fifteen to nineteen, the last four years of our marriage. They were dreadful. And that poor girl, she had to cope with it all. But she would come and sit with me in my bedroom, because I'd moved out of his room, and she would come and sit with me. "When are you going to get divorced? You've got to leave him". I mean, a lot on young shoulders ... I still feel bad about that, really.

But my son ... his way of dealing with it was to absent himself. And so he decided to become a Catholic priest, although we'd never brought them up as Catholic. Anyway, that's his story, really. I don't really think I should be telling it. But anyway, he didn't sustain it, and he's alright now. No, it was tough.

But yes, so after that ... I mean, I'd been getting into politics in the last days of my marriage. That was part of the thing he couldn't take, you know: I was becoming independent. I was active in the NUT, National Union of Teachers, I joined the Labour Party. And I'd never been like that before, and it was too much for him to cope with, my ex-husband. He just couldn't take it.

So, anyway, when I finally got divorced I then started to pursue politics more avidly. And, you know, I started going to NUT conferences, Labour Party conferences. And in 1992, I actually stood for Parliament in Sevenoaks, which was like the fourth safest Tory seat in the country, so there was no chance of getting in. But I had a whale of a time. I loved it. Talk about an ego trip, oh god, shouting out, "Vote for me!" You know. and pictures of my face and name up everywhere. Great fun.

But then, after that, I thought, "Well, maybe I ought to have a go at the real thing. See if I can get selected for a winnable seat". And I had a go. I really had a go in the next few years, and I did get shortlisted for three seats, which did go Labour. One was Gravesham, one was Welwyn Hatfield, and one was Slough. But anyway, I didn't get selected, so 1997 came, and the Labour Party got in, and I wasn't there. That was a bit sad for me, really. But by that time I was working for UNISON and still involved in trade union activities.

I: The first year you stood, in 1992, was the year after your mother died?

R: Yes, it was, and I had been already chosen as the Prospective Parliamentary Candidate, although the election hadn't been called. And, yeah, I was already in the limelight in the local papers every week. So I was always being asked to go on the local radio and things like that. And I had to decline for a little while because I was grieving. But I remember my cousin, Philip, who is also a Labour Party member, he was saying to me, "Are you

going to give up now?" And I said, "No". And I got back on the horse and did it. So, I always felt a bit sad that she never saw me stand for Parliament.

I: What do you think she would have made of it?

R: Oh, she would have been a bit bemused, I think, really. Yes.

I: Of course, she was still alive when you started to get into –

R: Yes, she was. She was, yes. I remember, it was about a month or so before she was killed ... and I always say "killed" because my parents didn't die, either of them; they were both killed. And that's they had their lives just cut short, like that. Yes, a month before, it was the Labour Party conference and it was in Brighton, quite near where she lived. And I was at it with my then boyfriend, so we called round to see her on the way. And I'd been interviewed on the television that afternoon, at the Labour Party conference, about education. Because I was, I had two hats on, I was NUT and I was a Prospective Parliamentary Candidate. And I was so proud I'd been interviewed, and I thought, "She knows I'm there. She'll have had the television on". So we went down, and I said, "Did you see me on the television this afternoon?" And my aunt and uncle were there, Aunty Winnie and Uncle Aubrey, and she said, "Oh no, I must have popped out to make a cup of tea for Aunty Winnie". And I thought she saw me on the television ... I was most miffed! [Laughter.]

So anyway, she would have been quite proud of me, I think. My daughter was proud of me. She came to the count, yes. That was good. And then I moved here, Reading, in 1993. Yes.

I: So, that was really poignant, what you said about sitting down in your own house for the first time as you were or just had divorced. Have you lived alone ever since?

R: Yes. I've had men friends but they've not lived with me. Yeah.

I: You mentioned that you visited your father's grave. There were quite a lot of graves in, was it—

R: In Berlin, yes.

I: Do you want to tell me about that?

R: Yes. My sister was just coming up to her 60th birthday, and for some reason we just decided it was the right time. And so, I arranged it and we spent three nights, I think, in a hotel in Berlin. And we knew it was in a place called Charlottenburg, and we didn't really know where that was in relation to where we were in the hotel. So we just asked for a taxi and asked them to take us there. And it's kind of in a lovely forest. And the taxi driver was really nice and he, I think he was Polish, he couldn't speak much English. And we didn't know that this place was a bit kind of out in the wild, so we were just going to get another taxi back. But then we realised and he said, "No, I'll wait for you. Don't worry". He was so nice. So, he waited there, and we'd done a bit of research and we knew it was in "Row Z Plot 13", or whatever it was. And so, we had a map of the place and we walked in. There were all these rows, as you know, of white headstones and we were kind of running around looking for the right row and the right number. And then we found it. And it was really very emotional.

Although I'd say ... I've written about this in my book ... the night before, we had separate rooms and I cried the night before, kind of in anticipation of what we were going to do and see the next day. And I've always often been quite not willing to share my emotions in front of my sister or people. And I kind of held it back, but I'd done a lot of crying already. But it was ... it was very, very emotional. Oh yes, we had got some flowers on the way and we put them in the ground. Yes, it was very special. And at that time, I don't think I was terribly aware that he'd been moved from the previous grave, but I just kept thinking, his bones are under there and he's been there all these years. All that time when I was growing up, and having my kids, and getting divorced, been doing all those things and he'd just been lying there. I know it's not him really, but it was.

Yes. I have been back there once, too, as well. I go on holiday each year with a group of women friends, and we went to Berlin one year, and I said, "I'd like to go and see the grave again". And they came with me, and they were so nice. And one of them, I didn't know this, one of them said ... My father was a Jew, by the way, the name is Benjamin. Although he wasn't a practising Jew, there's obviously Jews in the family. My great-great-grandfather was called Moses and I've got a whole family tree ... Anyway, she said apparently it's a Jewish custom that you put a stone on the top of the headstone every time you go and visit it. I didn't know that. And that's a nice thing to do. I wonder how many stones have been put on there since. I don't know. Yeah. In one of his letters, I think ... yes, it was written to my uncle Alf, my mother's sister's husband ... I've got lots of other letters that he'd written and one of them says something about, "He went on a raid but they didn't get me. Do they ever think they can shoot me down? What, me? A Jew? With a number like 77777?" I thought that was a great line. Yes. There's lots of other things connected with my father which have come up over the years and I felt like he was trying to ... I know this sounds a bit weird ... trying to contact me.

It's very strange because not long after I moved here, I got a phone call completely out of the blue from a genealogist, and he said, "Are you the daughter of Eric Arthur Benjamin?" And it was like a bolt out of the blue, and I just sat down, and he said, "Well, you've got a relative in a home in Bracknell", which is not far from here, "who was a cousin of your father's called Francois Benjamin, and we're trying to track down all his relatives because he's unable to make a will for himself and we're having to do it, so we need all the relatives". And I was dumbfounded, I'd never heard of this person. And so, he had to verify who I was and he asked for my sister's details and then he told me that I had two first cousins living in Surrey, called Sylvia and Joan, who were the daughters of my father's sister. And I knew that my father's sister was the black sheep of the family because she'd gone off with a married man, so she was never talked about. So, I never knew I had these cousins. They were almost the same age as me and Sally.

I was amazed. And then we also had loads of relations in Canada who, again, second cousins and things, but not that far removed. And since then, I've got in touch with them. I've been over to Canada. I've met them. We've met our cousins in Surrey although they've moved to Spain now. So, that was amazing. We actually met the cousins in Surrey on the day that Princess Diana died. So, that's a very, very sharp memory. Anyway, that was the first thing that I had this huge blast from the past.

And then a few years later, I got a letter in my office, I was working at UNISON, and this letter came from the NUT, and it had another letter inside. It said, "We have you on our records as a left-profession member of the teaching profession. Are you the same person?" Because I had changed my name, I had been Jeannie Evans. That was my married name and I've gone back to my maiden name. "Because we've got a letter from somebody in the Czech Republic who wants to contact you. So, let us know if you're that person and we'll send you the letter". So, they eventually send me the letter, and it was in very poor English. This man in the Czech Republic called Radovan Helt, saying he

was writing a book and he wanted to include a chapter about my father, thanking him for all the war efforts in helping to destroy the oil plant in Böhlen. And it's just weird, and so I've kept in contact with him and I never expected to have a letter thanking me for what my father had done all these years later.

Then there was a third thing that happened, in 2012, which was the most amazing of all. I went to the Bomber Command Memorial dedication in Green Park. It was this new memorial that had just been built, and it was being unveiled by the Queen, so I got an invitation as next of kin and I went there with my current partner. And I always thought that was like the funeral my father didn't have. I'd never thought about that before, him not having a funeral. My mother wasn't able to go to a funeral. And they had this magnificent fly past, and all these poppies were dropped. And that brought a tear to my eye. That was amazing.

And then anyway, a few days after that, I put something on the Bomber Command Memorial website, just saying about who I was and who my father was. And I got a thing on Facebook from this chap called Fraser Muir that I'd never heard about and he said, "I've been trying to contact you for years because I heard the last words your father said as he was being shot down that night". And I thought that was amazing. I mean, I never knew he said anything. Obviously, my mother didn't know. And so, anyway, we were corresponding, and we said, "What were they?" And it wasn't anything really remarkable. It just said, "Damn it. I've been hit. I'm going down. Come in number two". So, it was like he just was more concerned about what would happen to the aircraft and the bombing mission. Anyway, Fraser Muir was in the Canadian Royal Air Force and he obviously had not been in the plane, but he'd been in the group of planes and they could obviously hear on the intercom.

And this chap, Fraser Muir, said he'd been trying to contact me all these years because he'd been so impressed with the cool, calm, and confident manner that my father had said these last words. And Fraser said he'd always wondered what it would be like to be hit by flak and get shot down. And he's written this really, really long account of that night, and his feelings, and how he'd tried to find me and my sister all these years, and then he'd seen me on that page. And he'd been at the Bomber Command Memorial thing, but I didn't know that and he didn't know me. He'd come over from Canada for it. So, that really was quite amazing.

There were three things that happened and that was ... Who would have thought that there would be somebody still alive in the world who had heard my father's last words, and wanted to tell me. So, that was in 2012. So, we corresponded by email. I mean, this chap was five years younger than my father would have been, but they shared the same birthday, June 27th, five years apart.

So, we corresponded, and I got to meet him in 2015. He went over to the Netherlands for a big veterans' do to celebrate the liberation of the Netherlands. So, I made arrangements to go over there, and I met him. That was very emotional. And there's a Facebook page called "Canada Remembers", and they were all waiting there with their cameras when I went into the hotel where I was to meet him. There were all these flashbulbs going off, and we kind of had a big hug, and it was very emotional. Anyway, so it was on Facebook and it was really, really quite good. All these people doing likes and comments. He is such a lovely man. And his wife was there as well, and we just spent the whole day talking. A remarkable person. And I did a little interview with him, and I put it on YouTube, so it's there for posterity, and he's describing how that night ... how he felt, and what he heard. And that was 2015, and then Fraser died in 2016. So, that was very sad but I got to meet him. Wasn't that wonderful? I mean, he's 97 ... No, he would be 92 now, 92 or 93. So, pretty amazing. It's a shame my mother didn't know,

that was the only thing. It might have been too hard for her. Yeah. So, I don't know if there's anything else.

I: I'm just thinking it makes the words to your sister and your children so real, doesn't it? When she said to you, "You do have a father. He's just not here". You almost have the belated, almost sort of physical, material relationship to him and his life that you maybe didn't have when you were in there.

R: Yes. And I mean, when you're growing up, you just take it all. It's just normal, as I said. And the person with whom I'm having a relationship at the moment, he doesn't ... he can't understand. He can't get his head round the fact that I'm so interested in it now, and he said, "You've had all your life to do all this research and find out more. Why haven't you done it before?" I said, "Well, I was just living my life." But I've got time now and I'm interested now, I wasn't then, I was just part of what happened.

I: And as you say, it's often the way it is later in life that we wish we'd asked ...

R: Yes. That's right. So, I'm kind of, I am asking these questions but I'm having to find out for myself what the answers are. Yes.

I: You said earlier that your mother, too, went to your father's grave. Did she talk to you about that?

R: Yes. I've got a newspaper cutting of it to show you, in the local paper. Yes. She said she was very grateful to the Royal British Legion for paying for her to go over there with Fred. Yes. Gosh, again, you see ... that was 1987. That was the year I got divorced, so I was very wrapped up in my own affairs. I knew that she had gone, but I don't think I talked to her much about it.

I: Was that the only time she went?

R: Yes. Another time she went to Runnymede, although that is there for people who have no known grave. My father's navigator, who was called Jack Heath, Ettock Heath, something like that, he's commemorated there. So, I think they went to see his name on there because I do remember Sally and I were about 9 or 10, and she and Fred went there, and we were there, too, and I remember her coming away with Fred, in tears. I just have that little pictorial memory of that.

I: How did you feel when you ... after your mother's death ... you and your sister found all the letters?

R: Oh gosh, yes. That was really emotional. We were just overcome by the amount of them, and the fact that they were all tied up with ribbon in a nice little shoebox in the wardrobe. Yes. I remember, I think it might have been about a year later, my sister was in a relationship with somebody at the time who was very interested in aircraft and the war and everything. And he did a lot of research into my father's life. And he tracked down a piece of Pathé newsreel which my father had been on, which we knew about because there was a picture in the family album of him on the news. And my mother talked to me about it, and my aunt, and they're all very proud. They'd been to the cinema, and they'd seen him on there, and I remember my aunt saying, "I wanted to stand up and shout, 'That's my brother-in-law!'" So, we knew about it, but this boyfriend of Sally's had found this newsreel, and it was on a video tape called "Failed to Return", and it included a little extract of that actual newsreel. So, Sally came 'round one afternoon with her boyfriend and another bloke, and they put it on my television. They'd already seen it, and they brought it to show me.

And there he was speaking, and I'd never heard his voice before, and it was about a mission that he'd been on, and he was one of the three main people on the mission and they interviewed each one in turn. And he was saying, in a very posh voice, "Oh, we looked down and there we saw all these flames going on and the poor people down there". And it was quite empathetic. He was saying about the people down there that they were destroying, and he said, "It must have been awful for them". And I remember my sister had seen it, so she was looking at me for my reaction, and I was very conscious that she was looking at me, and so I kind of held back, which is a bit of a shame, but anyway. I've watched it many times since. And that's when we got out all the letters and the poem that he'd written to me and it was a very emotional afternoon, very. Yes. And a lot of these things, like the letter, the poem, I'd seen before and I'd read it before, but it was then that it really made an impact. Sometimes you just grow up with things, and they're just there, and then suddenly you realise how significant they are. Yes.

I: Before she died, had your mother ever mentioned the letters to you?

R: Yes. I think so. Yes. So, maybe we weren't that surprised. Yes.

I: But she'd never shown them to you before?

R: No, I don't remember seeing them. But we knew that he always called himself John. So, we must have known about them. Yeah. I was called Jeannie after the song, "I Dream of Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair". So everyone knows how old I am if they know about that song. That's quite nice. And because at the Catholic school you were supposed to have a saint's name, and I didn't, I'm afraid. Very bad. Very much frowned upon. All the other girls had [names like] Teresa and Celia. Yes. And my second name is Susan, which I never liked because everyone in the class is called Susan almost. But my father's mother, she insisted on calling me Susan for ages because she liked the name. Yes. We didn't have much of a relationship with her. It's a bit of a shame really because, I mean, I never gave much thought to ... She'd lost a son ... it's been dreadful. Yeah. His father had died some time before. See, that's what I'm researching now, trying to find out more about his family. Yeah.

I: Did your mother mark Remembrance when she was still alive?

R: Oh, yes. She used to put, well on his birthday, she used to put a rose in front of his picture and yes, Remembrance Day was always a big thing. And it is for me, still, because my mother, the date she died was November 8th, and that's very close, so I always think of them both together on that day. But even before she died, I always thought that was a special day. Yes. And again, on the actual day she died, November 8th 1991, which was a Friday, the Remembrance Sunday was two days later, and I was in Sevenoaks, but I was divorced.

Anyway, Sevenoaks had a local memorial thing, and so I went up to it and took part in a service there, and Dylan and Charlotte came with me, and I was really emotional then. It was just a couple of days after my mother had died, and I was remembering my father, and I remember they were quite baffled that I had tears in my eyes for my father, even though he'd died many years before. They couldn't quite get it. Yes. And you see, my current partner, for want of a better word, he doesn't get it either that I can still be so affected by my father's death. He said, "But you hardly knew him". But that's why. I know I was eighteen months, but it's more poignant than my mother's death, although I had all those years with her. It was hard to explain.

I: Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about, Jeannie?

R: Well, I was going to read out that page that my mother had written about the fall of France, but I don't think I want to now. I could do. What do you think?

I: **Completely up to you.**

R: I'll give it a go. This is part of the memoir that I discovered just after she died.

I: **Do you know when she wrote this?**

R: Yes, I do. She'd written it in bits and pieces, I think, over I don't know how long. But the scruffy bits of Basildon Bond notepaper, if you remember what that is, and blue paper and just written in biro, not in any thoughtful way, just like notes, and I think she'd done it in bits and pieces, but the letter that went with it was obviously written just a month before because it was just after Fred died, and she said she survived six months without him. So, that kind of dates it. And she's saying, "Don't be too sad". And all the rest of it, but "I've had a happy life and everything". And then, and it says at the end of where she describes her life and some of it, I've mentioned to you already, there's a page and a bit of what she says about, well, the Dunkirk moment. Although I never realised it was that. But shall I read some of it? Yes. So, she says:

"One of my most treasured memories is the night of June 17th 1940, the day France fell to the Germans. I woke about 11:30 to see my beloved of a few months standing at my bedroom door, weary, dusty and with a sprained ankle, but full of joy at reaching home. He had arrived back at his aerodrome at Nantes after an early bombing raid that morning to find the squadron had left hastily in the face of advancing Germans.

My photograph, the only thing left hanging on a tent pole. He jumped into a plane, a fighter, though he was a bomber pilot, and flew the Channel. He crossed London on the underground, mingling with homegoing workers, and arrived at 23 Mays Road, Teddington about 11:30. This sounds incredible, but I so vividly remember his description of the utter chaos in France and the long lines of pathetic refugees he saw from the air, and the contrast of the utter ordinariness of suddenly being among the London commuters on the underground.

What a rapturous reunion we had that night. I hadn't expected to see him for ages. I was afraid he would've been taken prisoner, as so many were. And the next morning, he answered the doorbell to receive a telegram telling me he was missing. How we laughed. We had a wonderful leave, visiting family and friends. He was quite the hero of our little circle. He had a happy 21st birthday party on June 27th before re-joining his squadron.

He did many more bombing raids, including several on Berlin, and was filmed by Pathé newsreel talking after one of these and calling it a piece of cake. On one raid, fifty planes were missing and he received the DFC and bar and reached the rank of Acting Wing Commander, but alas his lucky number, 77777 (five sevens), didn't make it. He was killed on February 20th 1945."

And then she goes on to say a bit more. Oh, yes ...

"There were only two planes missing on that raid, announced on the one o'clock news. And I thankfully carried on breastfeeding our three-week-old second daughter. The first one was eighteen months old. But the telegram came at two o'clock and, this time, it was for real. Forty years since the telegram came and ended my happy,

carefree youth.¹⁴ My babies were three weeks and eighteen months, now middle-aged. My darling is still 25. Age did not weary him or the years condemn.”

And then she jokes ...

“He did not grow fat either or lose his teeth. The years that I wished away with a fierce, young grief have passed. I have been re-reading for the millionth time these happy and concerned young letters.”

And then she quotes bits of the letters. And then, the last little bits are ... He says things like:

“Went to the cinema. A shilling seat, tell mum. Had bed and breakfast, seven and six. Bat man allowance of two shillings a day. Says the letters never fail to bring him and the time vividly to mind. So long ago but still like yesterday.”

See, that’s why I found it difficult to read. So, I don’t think there’s anything else to say.

I: Do you remember when you read that the first time?

R: Yes, of course I do. It was the day after she died. Yes. I found it because I had to go back down to her house the day after. Oh yes, well I mean, the night she died, I forgot to say that bit: I actually had to go and identify her body because ... just a formality. Anyway, the next day I drove back up to Sevenoaks that night and drove down the next morning on my own and had to go into her house because the police were coming. I’d arranged to meet them. Formalities. And then, when they’d gone, that’s when I kind of just looked around for things, and I looked in her desk, and I found the envelope with the memoir, as I call it, of her life. And the letter that went with it was for me and Sally, and all of that that I just read. Yes. Pretty powerful, the next day. Yes. So obviously I’ve photocopied it, and my sister’s got a copy as well. I mean, I’ve transcribed it also into my book, but the actual letter is ... you see the handwriting is the best bit. Yes.

I: Thank you so much for that, Jeannie, I know it can’t be easy.

R: It was tough. Yeah. It’s amazing, isn’t it, how you can read it in certain contexts, but reading it today to you is different. I can read it many times without feeling like this. Yeah. There’s a line that I think I’m going to use at some point in the next book I’m writing from Wordsworth, it’s called “Emotion Recollected in Tranquillity”. That’s kind of like this, isn’t it? Thank you for being so empathetic. You are. Yes.

I: So your mother remarried, and you said she was very happy with Fred, who you call your stepfather.

R: Yes.

I: Did you ever get a sense that she was always quite willing to consider remarrying? Did she ever feel like there might be an issue?

R: Of disloyalty or something? Possibly. Yes. There might have been a bit of that. I think Fred always knew he was second best. Yes. That’s been hard for him. Yes. But he was very supportive. He went to Runnymede with her and yes ... But, yes, I’m glad she had him because I remember when he died, and we went down there to support her and my aunt and everybody was there. I remember all just sitting round as you do and then my

¹⁴ See Fig. 7a and 7b.

mother went to the toilet, and it's only a little bungalow so I could hear her in the toilet, and I could hear her saying, "Oh no, Fred". And crying. And that was really poignant. She suddenly realised she'd been widowed a second time. She'd have to be on her own. She had a sad last few months.

I: And I suppose, at the same time, she'd had a chance at a long, happy second marriage.

R: Oh, yes. 22 years. Yeah. Much longer than she'd ever been married before. Yes. But I mean, you didn't call them single mothers in those days. She was just a widow. A single mother has a different kind of connotation, doesn't it? But she was.



Fig. 1: Jeannie Benjamin in Summer 2017 with a photograph of her parents (c. 1938).



Fig. 2: Eric and Betty Benjamin's wedding day. 3 December 1939.

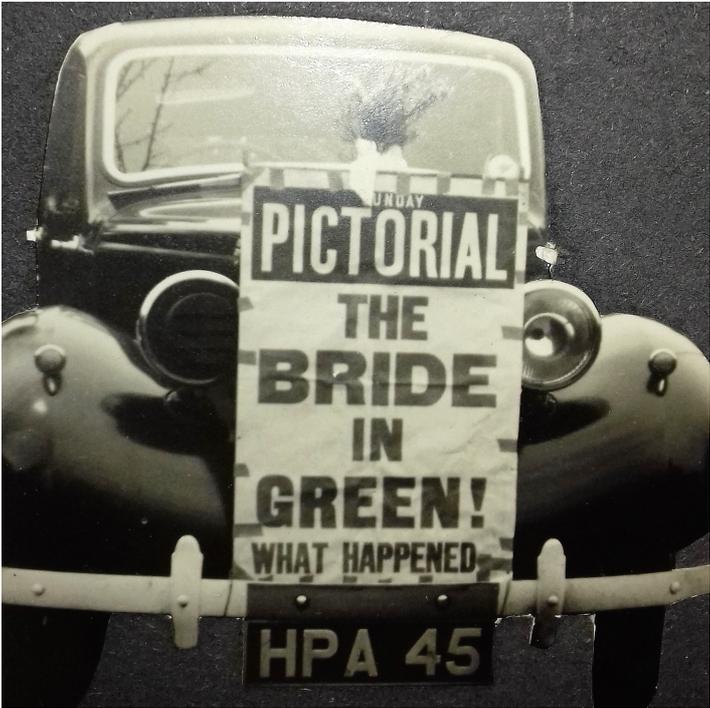


Fig. 3: Headline about Jeannie's parents' wedding in the national press. December 1939.



Fig. 4: Eric Arthur Benjamin (1919-1945). Wing Commander and Master Bomber. Distinguished Flying Cross & Bar.



To Jeannie

15.12.42.

Let us Prepare.

Beyond the far horizon, slowly, creeps

A new beginning of a life to be,

So let us, while the unborn baby sleeps,

Prepare a path in God; - and let us see

That all its infant fears & childish woes

Are banished from its troubled mind; our eye -

- Our parent eye - must watch & check these foes

In youth & never let our baby cry

For want of love & guidance of a kind

And understanding friend; - for out of love

And kindness grows a stronger will, - a mind

More resolute to face, with God above,

The daily trials of this life on earth.

Prepare us, now, O God, for this new birth.

20.7.43.

Before its baby eyelids open to a scared

& shattered world; before those precious

~~eyelids~~ eardrums vibrate to the wicked

blare of battle; before this contaminated

air fans those tiny nostrils and minute

lungs expand to inhale its wickedness;

Fig. 5a: The poem Jeannie's father wrote leading up to her birth. Page 1 of 2. 15 December 1942.

before we hear a cry from pure, virgin lips
and infant arms reach out to resist
these daily enemies;

- before all this, - let us pray.

Let us pray for the blessing of God, so
that our little one will have the strength
to fight all manner of evil which
comes its way.

17.8.43.

On this day - in the morning - she came into
the world -

Jeannie.

We give thanks
to God for this happy deliverance - there
was never a greater day.

Fig. 5b: The poem Jeannie's father wrote leading up to her birth. Page 2 of 2. 15 December 1942.



Fig. 6: Betty and Eric Benjamin with their two children, Jeannie (eighteen months old) and Sally (aged three weeks). This is the only photo of Benjamin with his wife and both daughters. February 1945.

GERRARD 9234

TELEPHONE :

Extn.....

Any communications on the subject of this letter should be addressed to :—

THE
UNDER SECRETARY
OF STATE

and the following number
quoted :— P.428733/1/45/P.4.Cas.B.3.B.

Your Ref.....



AIR MINISTRY

(Casualty Branch)

73-77 OXFORD STREET

W.1

16 July, 1945.

Madam,

I am directed to refer to your letter dated the 21st June, 1945, regarding your husband, Acting Wing Commander Eric Arthur Benjamin, D.F.C., (7777) Royal Air Force, and to inform you that a detailed report has now been received from the Squadron.

This report states that your husband's aircraft took off from base at 1.55 a.m. on the 20th February, 1945, to carry out an attack against Bohlen, and was last heard on the radio when over the target area at approximately 4.5 a.m. An aircraft was seen to hit the ground four miles north-east of the target, but it is not known whether this was the aircraft in which your husband was flying.

As all Air Force personnel who were evading or captured are in Allied hands and the majority have now returned to the United Kingdom it is felt that had your husband been safe, official notification would have been received by now and you yourself would have heard direct from him.

/It

Mrs. E. A. Benjamin,
23, Mays Road,
Teddington,
Middlesex.



Fig. 7a: Letter from Air Ministry informing Betty Benjamin of the circumstances of her first husband's death. Page 1 of 2. 16 July 1945.

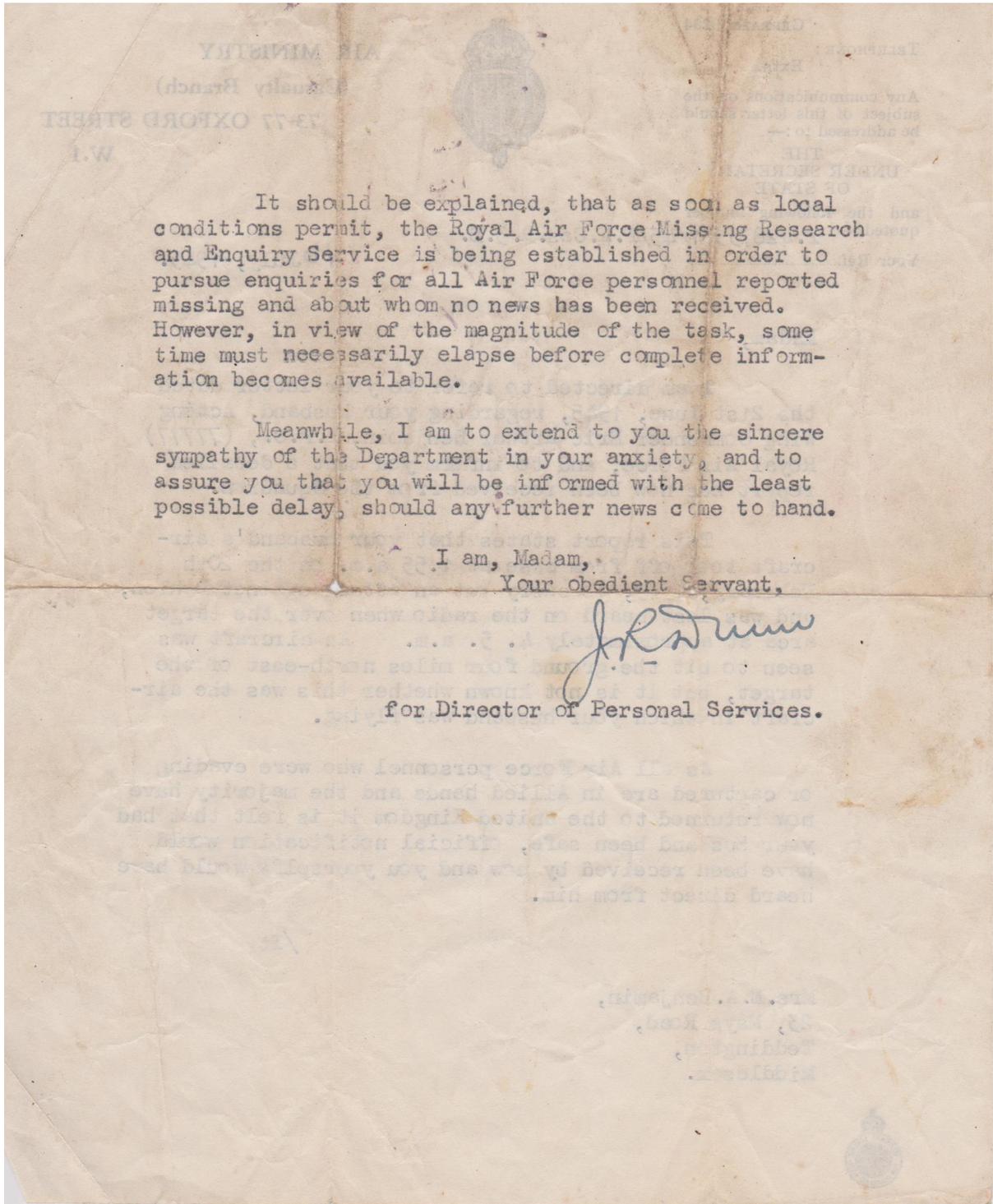


Fig. 7b: Letter from Air Ministry informing Betty Benjamin of the circumstances of her first husband's death. Page 2 of 2. 16 July 1945.



Fig. 8: Betty Benjamin as a young widow.



Fig. 9: Betty Benjamin (later Ridge) with her second husband, Fred Ridge, in their bungalow in Steyning (Sussex). C. 1985.



War Widows' Stories

History. Memories. Heritage.

An Interview with Christina Claypole

25 June 2017

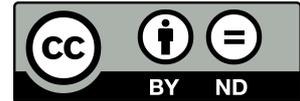
Conducted by Nadine Muller



The War Widows'
Association
of Great Britain



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To do so, and for any other questions about this interview, how you may use it, or about the project, please contact Dr Nadine Muller via email (info@warwidowsstories.org.uk), or by post at the following addressing: John Foster Building, Liverpool John Moores University, 80-98 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, L3 5UZ.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

I = Interviewer

R = Respondent / Interviewee

[] = Clarification note

I: So, today is the 25th June 2017. Could you tell me your full name please?

R: Christina Claypole.

I: And what is your age, Chris?

R: I'm 76.

I: Thank you. Chris, we're interviewing you today because you're the daughter of a war widow, so I wonder if we could start with your childhood. Where were you born, where did you go to school, what was it like growing up?

R: I was born in South Shields in County Durham, and I went to school there until I was seven. In the meantime, we were refugees ... not refugees, gosh ...

I: Evacuees?

R: Evacuees. Evacuated to Upton, near Pontefract, and unfortunately mum could not settle back in South Shields. She kept going back and the windows would be all blown out with the bombing, and one thing or the other, and we just travelled like gypsies backwards and forwards for several years. Then, after the war, she could not settle in South Shields, so we actually came to live in Woodlands in Doncaster.

So, I can remember at school once I had to go on the stage because the Canadians had sent us a parcel for the poor children, and they gave me a red itchy jumper, which was absolutely ghastly. And when I took it home I was so embarrassed because I had to get on the stage in front of all the children in the school and be so grateful for this red itchy jumper. And when I got home, Mum said, "Well, the good people of Canada have sent it so you will have to wear it".

And I wore it to school and I hated it so much and I came home in the evening at teatime with my elbows on the walls, and when I got home I had no elbows in the jumper. I'd ripped holes in them so I didn't have to wear that anymore. So that was quite good. But we had a very, very happy childhood. Very happy. Mum was a wonderful, wonderful parent. We used to sing and laugh. We didn't have any money, but it didn't seem to matter. I never, ever in my life felt poor, ever. It was just so easy. Very loving, very close,

me and my mother and my brother. My brother is two years older than me. And we've stayed close all our lives really. I think that's why now, [living] so close to mum, it's sort of payback. She could have put us into a home. The Naval Benevolent Fund always used to say, "Can you manage your children?" My brother used to cry, "No mum, don't send us!" And I used to think it would be a bit like Famous Five, and I used to say, "Oh that would be great, let me go". It certainly didn't worry me. I had a lovely childhood. Great.

I: Could you tell us a little bit of what you know about your parents and their earlier lives, when they met, their courtship? Do you know anything about that?

R: Yes, I know that my dad courted my mum from when she was fourteen, still at school. I've got a letter that said that he loved her in her little white ankle socks, and he used to pick her up on a motorbike from school. And I think they were married at seventeen and had two babies very quickly. In all fairness, I can't remember my dad at all because I was only a baby ... I think I was four months old when he went away to sea and, actually, he didn't come back because he went over to America to have the submarine refitted. And his sister actually lived in America, and they were famous photographers. That's why we have such lovely photos of my dad. We don't have any of mum and dad really together, but she took lots of photos and sent them for Christmas presents and things like that.

And we were supposed to go to America, to Aunt Lilian, and she was going to bring us up. I think ... I can't really remember ... but I think a liner went down very shortly before we were supposed to go over, and also my grandfather had apparently said to mum, "There's a lot in the letters about what she's going to do for the children, Chrissie, but what is she going to do for you? That's what I'm concerned about", and I think it probably hit home with mum. We abandoned and we didn't go. We were evacuated into Upton and then we lived with a lady who I called Auntie Porter, and she had one of those ... you know the big heavy shoes ... She had one leg shorter than the other and she had this big ... I can remember that ... She had this big boot on. Her husband was a Japanese Prisoner of War, and he did come back after the war. But she was a lovely lady. She used to take in dressmaking. And every time she had an order for something she used to ask them get another little bit of material. She used to tell them a little bit more, and out of that bit she always made me a dress when I was little and growing up. So that was lovely.

We got very friendly with another family, I think Charlie Williams, the comedian, was in Upton at the time. He and these other lads used to always come and take mum out and my auntie used to say, "Go, Chrissie, go and have a night out". And she would look after us two children, and my dad's sister ended up marrying one of the boys, which was lovely. My uncle Frank. They became part of our family, extended family, and we stayed very close. Even to this day, I am very close to their daughter, Gillian. She's very special to me.

Nothing, really, that I can think of as I was growing up because mum did a wonderful job, mother and father really. I mean, we had nothing, but it didn't matter, did it? We ended up with good jobs and I never really, as I say, I never really missed my dad until I was sixteen at work and I heard the other girls talking about what their father was going to get them for Christmas. And I thought, "Gosh, I've really missed out big time on this". But not ... you don't miss what you haven't had. I feel very sad that mum missed a married life, really.

She did have a couple of boyfriends, but you know ... in those days, the mothers wouldn't let the boys take on other men's children. It was very veto-ed. If somebody had a child

that wasn't theirs ... you know? She had a couple of boyfriends. I think me and my brother saw them off. One of them used to lisp, and we used to play cards, and I can remember that, and I must have only been five or six. We played cards and when he got to the ace of spades he used to say, "Athe of spathes". And so when it was my turn, that's what I said, and so he didn't come back. It's quite sad for mum, really, but we laughed a lot. We laughed a lot. It was lovely. A lovely childhood.

I: Could you tell us a bit about your mum's early life?

R: She was one of eight children. Eight children. I think she was the third girl in a row, and her dad used to say, "There's no wonder you're unlucky, Chrissie, because when they said it's another girl I said drown the little devil". He said, "I didn't mean it, I just so wanted a boy", but he said, "I wonder if that's why you've been so unlucky". My grandmother was a war widow because grandfather was gassed in the First World War, and he died about ten months, I think, after my dad. She had two children late in life who weren't much older than me and my brother, so they were very much like two war widows together. Although war widows wasn't a word in those days, and so they both scraped through, and I know that my Nan helped my mum out as much as she could.

She used to give us, every weekend, that was the only treat we ever got as we grew up, she used to give us an old three-penny bit, the eight-sided or six-sided one, and a two-ounce sweet coupon. And we used to go to Billy Thirwell's corner shop. That was our weekly treat from my nana. One day our Ron came back and he'd bought a bit piece of parachute silk for my mother. He didn't buy sweets. I did, but he didn't. And he came back, and mum said, "Well what do you want me to do with it, Ron?" And he said, "I thought you could make yourself a bra". [Laughter]. With the parachute silk. He used to buy her a bottle of ink, but I unfortunately used to buy the sweets, but there you are.

It was quite a sad life for her, really, because we never had money for the pictures or anything like that. She used to go to bed with us because she couldn't afford to keep the fire on and the electric on, so we all went to bed together. We had a two up flat, with a little pantry off. The toilet was down the stairs and out in the yard, and the man next door ... I could, never believe that the man next door was a miner who got free coal, and yet he took mum's butter and sugar off her for a bucket of coal. And he knew she'd been left with two children. That was really ... that, to me, is so hard to take because you would give them a bucket of coal when you got it free, wouldn't you? Really, I think so anyway.

She had terrible jobs. She had terrible jobs working for people. She once had to dust with a white duster. I can remember that. She said, "But she doesn't get the better of me because I do it with my own duster and I keep the white one in my pinny pocket". Because the lady said if there was dirt on the duster she hadn't done it properly the day before, so mum used to dust with her own. But she could only do menial jobs because she had two children to look after. She couldn't go out to work properly.

I: She'd worked for a long time, hadn't she, before she got married?

R: Yes.

I: Before she had you.

R: She'd always done service. She's always done menial jobs, really. When we came to Woodlands she worked for Dame Lindley Wood as a kennel maid at Hampole, and Ms. Wood used to show dogs at Crufts. And when she went to Crufts I used to go with my mum and we used to sleep over in The Priory at Hampole, and it was very spooky. Very spooky. And mum used to look after the dogs while she went. That was one of her jobs,

but she never had anything meaningful. She was always very determined that we would do well. She always made us work, work at school to do well. And we did all right. We both had decent jobs. We both came through it okay.

I: What work did your mum do when she was a teenager?

R: I honestly don't know. I think that's when she was in London, was it?

I: Can you tell us a bit about that?

R: She was sent at fifteen with half a crown to work in a deaf and blind home, and she learnt the sign language then, and she used to read the letters to the people with their fingers with the sign language. I can't imagine sending a child of fifteen to London from Newcastle with a half a crown in their pocket to get there, and actually get to the home and find her own way, but obviously she did it, so she did very well. Apart from that, she did housekeeping jobs and things. I can't think what else she did.

I: Did she ever tell you anything about when your father proposed or when they got married?

R: No, never. Never said anything about it. I know she said she used to ride on the motorbike. My brother ... now he says he can remember filling my dad's sailor hat with sawdust in the corner shop, but whether he can remember remembering I'm not sure because he would have only been a baby. He wouldn't have been very old, but he always said he could remember that. Her father one day gave her a cat o' nine tails and said, "Chrissie you're going to have to be mother and father to these children, so don't use it, just keep it hanging on a nail, and when they're naughty, you'll get the cat o' nine tails". So one day ... she'd done this for years ... one day my brother said, "Well it doesn't hurt anyway". So she said, "Really? I'll show you if it hurts", so she tapped him and she tapped me. Well, I wouldn't have dared to say it hurt because he would have hit me. So I said, "It doesn't hurt. It doesn't hurt". So she hit us a little bit harder and a little bit harder. "No, mum. It doesn't hurt", and then she said, "Well this will hurt". And she really let wham. She hit him and she hit me. My goodness, but she never found it again because I held the loft open with a brush and my brother threw it up. So she never found the cat o' nine tails after that, and that was left behind in South Shields when we came to Upton, the cat o' nine tails stayed behind. It didn't come with us. She would have never hit us on purpose. We were just being cheeky I think.

I: You and your brother sound like a right pair.

R: Yes, we were. We were. Very close, and still close today. I mean, he's gone this afternoon to see mum because I can't be there, so it's a nice close family.

I: What do you know about your father joining the Forces ... going to war? Do you know anything about that?

R: I once read a letter that mum had written, and she said, "John joined straightaway because he wanted to give the children a better life. He wanted to make sure the children had a better life". And she said, quite honestly, if they knew how I'd been treated ... if he'd knew how I've been treated since, they would have to drag him kicking and screaming to get him into the Forces. He would have never gone and left us. He thought we'd be well taken of, and they weren't. But there were too many of them. Too many ladies, you know? Left without. Today for the younger ones they're quite well looked after, and so they should be. But there were just too many at my mum's age. There were men coming back without jobs and things like that. I think war widows were just at the

bottom of the pile, weren't they? And I mean, thank goodness that the War Widows Association was founded in 1972 because at least they fought and got these ladies ... they've all ended up with a decent pension now, and so they should. They shouldn't have to have struggled all these years. It's really good. They've done a fabulous job.

I: Can you give us some of the details? Which force your father joined, what his journey looked like from there?

R: Well, he joined the Royal Navy, and then he volunteered for the Submarine Service, and he joined the Submarine Service. He was on the submarine, and it went over to America to be refitted, and on the way across they picked up some survivors from a Dutch ship, and Jack, one of the survivors of dad's submarine, said, "Boy were they glad to see us when we picked them up". He said, "Your dad had to cook meals in the tiny little galley for 100 people", in a tiny submarine galley, you know? For 100 people.

Because I met the survivors ... 30 years after, more. Let me think how old I would be. 40 odd years after my dad. And I went down to Gosport with my husband and we went in the submarine base there, and on the outside it says HMS Porpoise and Geoff said, "Chris, that's the sister submarine to your dad's. He was on the Pandora". And this old guy came out in the Royal Navy blues and he said, "Can I help you?" And Geoff said, "Her father was on the Pandora". "Come on in", he [the old man] said. He showed me a book, and it had my dad's name in it. Well, nobody ever really talked about my dad, you know? It was quite emotional. He'd got a chart and he knew where every submarine had been lost during the war. They called him Gus Britain, and he was in charge of the museum at Gosport. He was lovely, he said, "I'll get you all of his service record, and I'll get you this, and I'll get you that". I was so excited. I came home, and we'd only been home I think less than an hour and the phone went. He said, "Christina it's Gus Britain. Would you like to meet two of the survivors of the submarine?" Can you believe that? We did not even know there ever were any survivors of the submarine. I said, "Yes, but I'll have to have a cup of tea first" because I was shaking. I was absolutely shaking.

Anyway, we did meet Gus and Mack.¹⁵ Gus had got out through the torpedo tubes in Malta.¹⁶ It was torpedoed in Malta Harbour in Valetta on April 1st 1942. And apparently there was a carrier called The Lance and that's what they were after, but they took the submarine as well, and another submarine. They got all three of them in the harbour that day. Gus actually got out through the torpedo tubes while it was sinking.¹⁷ Amazing. Absolutely amazing. I think one guy got off and they never saw him again, and they were all hiding under lorries, and when they looked they were full of ammunition. It was dreadful. So we found a lot from that, and I've actually got a letter from Mack to say that he wrote down his account, and it tells you all about that day in Malta.

I took mum back to Malta on a pilgrimage, and I wrote to the chief ... no, the harbour master ... because I knew he'd know. Do you know, the admiralty in London said ... I asked where the submarine had gone down because I wanted to know where to take mum specifically ... and he said, "He has no grave but the sea". They wouldn't tell me, and that's years after. Mum cried for a fortnight, and I thought, "perhaps I'm not doing the right thing here". And I said, "Well I know who would know. The harbour master has got to know," and they were brilliant. They took us right out to the spot and we laid wreaths. I laid my wreath, and what did it do? It flipped over upside down, and I cried. The Chief Petty Officer of a sister submarine, who they brought with them on the day,

¹⁵ Respondent correction: Jack (not Gus).

¹⁶ Respondent correction: Jack (not Gus).

¹⁷ Respondent correction: Jack (not Gus).

put his arm around me and said, "Don't worry. It's probably the right way up for a submarine. Upside down". It was quite sad.

Since then I've been back three times now to Malta, and each time we've laid a wreath and each time it's flipped. Last time we did it, it sailed out about twenty yards, and then turned over and went down, the wreath. It's just uncanny really, isn't it? It's a bit spooky, but there we are.

I: How did your mum feel about it when you took her?

R: Well, the Maltese people were wonderful with her because they could remember. The pilot of the harbour, of the pilot boat, he could remember being a boy of seven, and he said they put the children to live in the caves, and he said, "When we came out our clothes were green mouldy", and they were eating rats. They had no food, no nothing, no fuel. And the submarine, you see, went in with all the ballast things full of aviation fuel. It was a floating bomb anyway, wasn't it? And they said they had more bombs dropped on Malta in April 1942 than dropped on London in the whole of the war. They just absolutely smashed Malta to pieces. So they put the children in the caves to keep them safe. But he could remember. He said women were trying to siphon fuel off as the ships were going down, they were so desperate for things. They had no food, they had nothing. So they had it rough, didn't they? In Malta. But mum enjoyed it.

I took my nephew, my brother's eldest boy and a cousin with me last time I went because mum was getting a bit older and it's a bit difficult. It's a good job I did because she got stuck in the bath, and we couldn't get her out, and I had to ring my nephew come and help me, I can't get nana out of the bath. [Laughter]. So he had to come and help, so we had a lot of laughs as well while we were there. It was a good trip, a really good trip. That's it.

I: Can we go back to your childhood a little bit? Did your mum ever talk about your dad?

R: Not very often. Not very often. I think she did a lot of her crying in private. I don't think she ever wanted to upset us. I mean obviously we always knew he came from Jarrow. We always kept in touch with his parents, and his brothers and sisters, but I think they could have helped her a bit more than they did, but they didn't, so ... She never really talked an awful lot. I mean, we've always seen the photos and, thanks to Aunt Lilian in America, we have got decent photos, otherwise we wouldn't have had anything. My aunt Lilian had one daughter, and when Aunt Lilian died ... They'd done a Cinefilm of my dad. Can you imagine, seeing him walking and talking? I couldn't believe it. I knew they had because Aunt Lilian came over, and she came to see my mum, and she was going to bring us up, you see, so she came to see us. And then when she died I wrote to my cousin Phyllis Ann and said, "If there's any Cinefilms of my father, could you please send them? I'll pay any expenses". Because, we've never ... I can't remember seeing him. And I don't think she even answered my letter, so we didn't get them. I bet they've just been burned and lost. It's so sad. I mean I've seen photos, but I can't imagine seeing him walking and talking and that. It's quite sad, really, to have lost those. Quite special, weren't they? But, that's life, isn't it?

I: What was life like when you were a child during the war? You've already said you'd been evacuated and it was all a bit exciting.

R: Oh, I know. Well, we were like gypsies. We used to go from Doncaster to South Shields regularly on the Halls Brothers busses, and just travel backwards and forwards. But, you see, mum always thought that perhaps dad would come back. She always thought she

better get home because he might have lost his memory and then remembered who he was and come back. I think when he was first lost ... I mean I was only a tiny baby at the time ... she used to go shopping and then have to run home because she thought he might be there, you know? That's really sad. But she couldn't settle in either place, so every time we went to school we got immunised twice because they'd just done them in South Shields and then they'd come to Doncaster. They're just doing them in Doncaster and you'd say, "I've already been done", and they say, "Well it won't hurt to do them again". So we always copped for it twice, you know?

But my brother was very clever, exceptionally clever, and he passed his 11+, I think, when he was nine, in South Shields. Then we moved to Doncaster and he couldn't understand how they spoke. He was having real trouble, you know, grasping everything. He took the exam straight away and failed it, so he went to secondary school and he'd passed him at nine years of age. They said, "Well no. You have to pass in this county". So sad because he was so clever. We used to call him the ready reckoner. He could add up in his head brilliantly, but he did all right. He trained as an electrician, then he went to work at the colliery, and he was a fitter and very well spoken of and did fine, did okay.

I left school at sixteen and mum paid for me to go to the comptometer operator, but that's obviously before thingies [calculators] came in, and I travelled to Leeds for three or four months and then I went into town, into Doncaster, and got three jobs. I could just choose which job I wanted. I never really looked back jobs wise, and as I say, that was the first time I missed my dad. You don't miss what you haven't had. It would have been nice to have had a dad but we managed very well thanks to a wonderful mother.

I: So how old were you and your brother in 1942 when your dad left?

R: Well I would be ... just turned a year old. And my brother would be two and a half.

I: So when you later weren't on a bus between Pontefract and South Shields –

R: [Laughter].

I: – what was going on? Tell me a little bit about what you remember about your everyday life. What did you get up to?

R: Well, I can remember going to school when I was only three years old. Ron didn't want to go. He was a bit of a cry baby, our Ron. If we were ever invited out, he used to go up to mum and he used to put an arm in her coat and then go round the back and put the other arm in and then get her handbag and hang it on her arm and say, "Are we going home now mum?" I never wanted to come home. I was always the outgoing one, you know. And, of course, he went to school in Upton and I followed him so many times that in the end they let me stay. So I went to school at three. [Laughter].

But I loved school, absolutely loved school. Brilliant, really, really adored school. I didn't want to leave actually. It's a bit sad that, isn't it? I can't think of anything else really that was of interest. We always had a cat, we always had a dog. We had a very normal ... to say she was on her own ... she did remarkably well. I think so, anyway.

I: Of course, I saw your mother earlier and had a chat with her. I seem to recall someone dressing up the dog ... ?

R: Oh yes, yes. It was an Old English Sheepdog, and one of my hobbies was getting baby clothes, putting them on the dog, and wheeling it round the village as my baby. It was

wonderful, the dog. He used to follow us to school, and he used to jump on the bus, get off at the shops, cross the crossing, and he'd go down to the grammar school to find me. If he couldn't find me, he'd go up to the other school to find Ron and if he couldn't find ... we used to hide, because people used to say, "Your Skipper is here". And we used to hide because he wouldn't go away. He wanted to be with you all the time. And if he couldn't find either of us, he used to get back on the bus and go home. But he used to lay on the platform and he wouldn't move for anybody. He was just this great big Old English Sheepdog, but he was a lovely, lovely dog. It made our home normal, really, didn't it? It's a shame. It is a shame mum couldn't have had another love in her life, really.

I: What impression did you have of your mum when you were young, when you were a teenager?

R: She was very beautiful, you know. Really lovely-looking lady, and always happy. She used to sing ... We used to sing at the table. We used to say in mock opera, "Pass me the butter". I'm not going to sing it now because I sing like Edith Allo Allo now. [Laughter] And I couldn't possibly sing on this tape, but we used to sing to each other, "Pass me the butter, pass me the tea", you know? Crazy things that cost nothing, really. I can remember helping her to decorate, and I only had washing-up mops. You probably won't remember them ... they were like little stringy mops, and you dipped them into the emulsion thing and then you splattered them on the wall and it made rose patterns. I can remember doing that as a child, and I can remember cutting out flowers out of magazines and sticking them on as a border. Although we didn't have anything, we always had fun, a lot, a lot of fun. I know she used to take my hair ribbons off, and she used to roll them up and then stick them under the teapot because she couldn't afford to put the iron on to iron my ribbons, so she put them under the teapot and that pressed them.

She said she she used to break glass in with the coal to put on the fire to make it last longer ... break jam jars. That's a bit dangerous, isn't it? I can't imagine anybody doing that today. I can't imagine anybody being so hard up. I know we had ... a great friend was my aunt Mona. She wasn't a real auntie, she was just mum's friend, and she used to work in a fish and chip shop in South Shields. I must have been five or six then, and she was very good to mum. She used to give her big pieces and chunks of lard and fat from the fish shop and odd bits of stuff, you know? But she always lent mum half a crown on a Friday, and mum paid her back on a Monday, because by Friday she had nothing left in her purse. And mum used to pay her back on a Monday when she got her pension, and at the end, when we eventually moved, nobody knew whose half-crown it was. It was backwards and forwards so many times that they weren't sure whether it was my Aunt Mona's or my mum's, you know? But she was nice with mum. She always looked after mum.

I mean, times were hard for lots of people, weren't they? I can remember the children next door to us, and I don't think they had any shoes some of them. Because I used to cry and say, "Why do I have to wear shoes? The Aimses don't". I was a horrible child, really. Yes, "The Aimses children don't wear shoes, so why have I got to?" My mum said, "You've got to wear shoes because you've got shoes, so you've got to wear them". So she made me wear them.

I think it is a great shame that she's not well enough now to go to Laura's graduation and see her great-granddaughter get a degree. That would really ... it would be fabulous, but it's such hard work now. She's just not very mobile at all. It would be too hard to get her to Newcastle and do that, but a great shame because I think she would have got a huge kick out of that.

Mind, as you've seen on the photograph on the Snapchat photo, Laura put her a doggy's tongue and little ears and a funny nose on, didn't she? They all think the world of her, the children.

I: So when you were younger, you never really had a notion that your mum was struggling to feed you and your brother and herself?

R: No. I know we had no money, so you don't ask. If you know the money isn't there you don't even think of asking for it. We never asked because we knew there was nothing there to ask for, but we were always so happy. We were always laughing and singing, and, as I say, she used to go to bed with us because she couldn't afford to keep the fire on. She used to build the fire in the winter for when we came in from school, and she would make the fire, and that would be it. You could not build it, you couldn't redo it because there wasn't any coal or anything, so it was just lit once and that was it. So, quite sad really. I mean, to think not to have enough money to put an iron on. Dreadful, dreadful.

I: Did she ever tell you afterwards how bad things actually were, or did you just guess or put things together?

R: I've learned more since she wrote her own story, you know? One night she couldn't sleep, she got up and wrote it down. It broke my heart when I read it, when I realised that her mother cut her soap in half to give her half the soap because mum could only afford soap or bread, so she bought the bread and had half of her mother's soap. I can't physically imagine anyone being that hard up, really, at all. But to go from Friday to Monday and not a penny in your purse, and as a little girl I can remember her being a halfpenny short of her rent, and we were in an upstairs flat, and the rent woman was stood down at the front door waiting for this nine shillings I think it was. Yes, it was because she got 29 shilling a week, that was her pension, and nine shilling was rent, so she virtually had twenty shillings a pound to keep us on, and she used to put it in the jar in the cupboard. In the cup in the cupboard, the rent. And when she went to get it she had eight and eleven pence halfpenny. She was a halfpenny short, and she had me and my brother feeling down the edges of the chairs to see if we could find a halfpenny for this rent woman. And in the end, she said, "I'm sorry, I've done it wrong, but I'll make it up next week". And do you know what the rent woman said? "Make sure you do". I don't know. It's horrendous, isn't it? Really.

Her brothers were very good to her, but you see they were away fighting in the war anyway. Her youngest brother chased Rommel through the desert. He was in the Desert Rats. He went away at seventeen and came back a big strapping man in his twenties. She never saw him, so he wasn't there to help. Her other brothers ... She was very proud, you know? She wouldn't accept charity. Charity was a funny word in those days. Two of my uncles used to say to her, "I tell you what, Chrissie, I'll swap what's in my pocket for what's in your purse. You could come off worse but you could come off better". They will have just gone and changed money so they had ... and that was the only way they could get her to take money off them because it was like, "We don't have charity".

I mean, she never had any new clothes. Ever. Second-Hand Rose she used to call herself. I had my first new dress when I was sixteen and I started work, and that was the first time I'd had clothes that hadn't belonged to somebody else. And do you know what? It didn't bother me at all, not one little bit. It was nice to get new ones, but it really didn't bother me. She did her best and that was it. I know my brother, he trained as an electrician, and he got absolutely nothing as an apprentice. He got coppers, and what he got she let him pay it on a bike, so he could get to work, so she never got any money off Ron either. She just scraped and scraped all her life, really. And now, thanks to the

War Widows' [Association], she's got a decent pension, although we have to pay quite a bit in care, but at least the money is there if she needs it, isn't it.

I: So you'll remember probably when the War Widows' [Association] first started campaigning in the early 1970s?

R: No. I'm trying to think how long ago it is. It was probably the end of the seventies when we even found out about the War Widows' [Association]. And it was Irene Shields, who was Irene Bloor then ... She came to see us, actually, and she talked me into being RO [Regional Organiser] for South Yorkshire.

I: So that's regional organiser.

R: Well yes, because I used to take mum and two or three of the other ladies. We used to hold a meeting in Sheffield. Irene used to hold a meeting in Sheffield because she was the Regional Organiser for South Yorkshire, but then she moved and she made me – "made" being the operative word – she made me be Regional Organiser, and I've done it ever since. I must admit though, I'm not doing it very well at the moment because I just haven't got the time. I go every day to see my mum and I spend half a day every day down at the [care] home to make sure she's okay, and I just don't have time to fit in these lunches and outings and letters. I still do my letters to the ladies, but I think it's probably time I hung up my boots on that. But I'm very grateful to the War Widows' [Association]. Mary Brailsford, one of the Chairmen, she was a very special friend of mine, very special. She was from Chesterfield. She was a lovely lady. So yes we've had some great times with the war widows.

I mean, mum has been everywhere. She's been to High Grove, she's been to Downing Street, she's been to Buckingham Palace. When I had my breast cancer and we were invited to Buckingham Palace I couldn't go. So my daughter-in-law took her and I said to her, "Diane, when you're finished and when you've had your tea in Buckingham Palace go into St. James Park because there's a big war widows' stand there". I knew they'd got mum's photograph blown up on the stall, you know? Apparently, they met Prince Andrew walking through the park and my mum said to him, "We've just been to your mother's for tea". He said, "No, no, no, get it right, dear. You've been to my brother's for lunch". [Laughter]. He got it all wrong. But, yes, she's had some lovely, lovely times through the War Widows' [Association].

And I've taken her loads and loads of places. It's just that now she's just too old, really, and it's just too hard to get her to these places. Getting her in and out of the car is hard. I mean, she'll be 97 next month, and I shall have a drop in at home, and everybody will just come and go and celebrate her birthday, and she'll just sit like the queen in the conservatory, holding court, and taking good wishes off everyone. She's still quite a happy person, she's still quite happy. She gets a little bit lost now. She gets a little bit confused and a little bit lost as to where she is, but I think she's doing really well. For the hard life she's had, she's done remarkably well I think so.

I: So it sounds like through the War Widows' Association, your mum ended up actually meeting other war widows –

R: Yes.

I: – as well, to socialise with.

R: Yes.

I: Were you ever aware when you were younger of any other women around you who had lost their husbands?

R: No, never.

I: Were there any other children without fathers or – ?

R: No. There must have been, don't you think? There must have been, but it did not actually stick in my memory until we joined the War Widows' [Association], and we'd made some lovely, lovely friends from all over the country really from the War Widows' [Association], and we've had some lovely times. I mean, I used to take [her] every year down to November Remembrance to the AGM [Annual General Meeting]. I never missed the AGM. I just can't do it now because if I want to go on holiday I have to sort of get substitutes for me to go and see mum because I don't like her to be left without a visitor. So I save all the favours for if I want to go away on holiday, so it's very difficult for me to even get away for a weekend now. And I just think ... How much longer will I have her, really? I'm not going to have her that much longer. Although she said the other day that she was going for 100. She probably will, she probably will. [Laughter].

The oldest lady was 117 that's just died, and I thought oh my goodness if mum gets to that, I'll be 97. [Laughter]. It doesn't bear thinking about, does it? It's quite scary. But no, we'll look after her while she's still here and take her out as much as we can but that's getting less and less I'm afraid.

I: Do you and your mother still mark Remembrance even if you don't go anywhere?

R: Oh yes, we've done it locally. I always make sure we've got a wreath laid in Doncaster town centre, but for the past three or four years I've done it locally at the local church and taken mum in the wheelchair, you see, because I can push her round there. It's just getting in and out of cars with the wheelchair, and she's so unsteady now, and I mean I've even had her down to London in the wheelchair. That is a bit heavy going because I'm not getting any younger myself. You forget that you can't do this year what you did last year. It gets harder each year, doesn't it? So, yes, we'll be there in September and I'll always mark remembrance. Last year I didn't because I was in Cyprus, but I took my poppy cross and I found a church in Cyprus that had a remembrance service and we went to the service and I laid the cross in Cyprus, so I was there in spirit.

I: So you did mark it even though you were away?

R: Oh, I will always mark it, always, because they shouldn't be forgotten should they? They've got to be remembered. This is a wonderful thing to keep their stories because there are some really sad, sad stories, some of the ladies. I mean some of the ladies lost their babies when they got the telegrams, and it was so final. I think in mum's book there was a telegram that came: "Missing: presumed dead". For years, my mum... well, even now she wouldn't ... open a brown envelope because of that. She hated brown envelopes, almost went into shock when one came. We always as kids had to do it for her, open a brown envelope. Dreadful. And you see, when the war was over it must have been so hard for them. Nothing to celebrate really, had they? Except that the war was over. I don't really know what mum did on that day. I think we had a street party. Yes, we did. I've got a photograph actually somewhere of a street party. Yes, we did, and I'd be in South Shields then in this street party. All jelly ... I can remember jelly and things. [Laughter].

But it must have been a very sad time for her, and for all the ladies. I mean, you can't imagine how many we're talking compared with how many we're talking from

Afghanistan and Iraq and Ireland, and ... There's no comparison in the numbers and that's why they were left behind. That's why there were just too many to do anything for. I mean, luckily, they've come good and given them a decent pension. Thank you, Margaret Thatcher, for that.

I: You mentioned earlier that your mum won't be able to see her great-granddaughter graduating unfortunately. Can you give us a bit of an idea of what the family looks like now? Because it sounds like you were all very close. What does your mum's family look like now?

R: My mum's family now ... my brother had three children. Philip, the eldest, he's got a son and a daughter, and his daughter has got two little girls, which are both great-great grandchildren. His daughter, Ron's daughter, has got three girls, and one of them has had a little boy, Mason, and he's a great-great grandson. I had two boys and a stepdaughter, and my youngest boy's daughter has just had a little girl called Georgia Lily, and that's another great-great granddaughter, so she's got three great-great granddaughters and one great-great grandson, which is amazing, isn't it? Absolutely amazing. Five generations. I can't believe I'm a great grandmother, but there we are. I am. And, yes, we all get together. I had a great-great granddaughter (one of them) here last weekend because it was my son's fiftieth, and we had a bit of a party, and Stacey came (Philip's daughter) came and brought Lexie, who's mum's great-great granddaughter, and she was with her in the garden. She loves it. She loves the children. She's very kind with them. She'd like to give them ... Money is always, gosh money. She's fixated with money. She's got to have money in her purse, and they said in the care home, "Your mum is always counting her money". I said, "Yes because to her it's so important that you've got something in your purse, that's why". And so, she's always counting her money, so when the children go she's always making sure she's got money in there.

I: Why do you think it's so important to her?

R: Because she's gone so long without anything. Can you imagine going a weekend without a penny and two babies? Two children and not a penny in your purse. It must be awful, absolutely. Do you know, I don't know what she fed us on because, really. She didn't have much. She had a pound a week to feed us, clothe us, keep us warm. Horrendous. So I don't know what we ate, but you know, she could always make a meal out of nothing. Always. When we were older, teenagers, and we had friends, they always used to come to our house because mum baked on a Sunday, and there was never any baking left by Monday because they all used to come ... She used to fill every counter, every work surface with baking. All our friends used to come and eat it. [Laughter.] She used to make ham and egg pies and apple pies ... gorgeous.

I: Did you join in with the baking?

R: I do not know, I can't remember now. I don't think I did. I probably couldn't be bothered.

I: But the eating is important.

R: She just liked it. I know. I've just seen one of my dad's letters and he said, "I suspect Ronnie is getting a big boy now and toddling around, and I bet Chrissie is as fat as ever". Me! [Laughter]. That's not very nice, is it? Because I'd got mum's book out, I was just reading through some of the letters. Yes, I'd never seen that one before. "I suspect Chrissie is as fat as ever". I must have been a fat baby. [Laughter]. I don't know.

I: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

R: I'd just like to say a huge thank you to the War Widows' Association because without them mum's final years would have been much more miserable. She wouldn't have gone without, don't get me wrong, she wouldn't have gone without because neither me nor my brother would ... I mean, mum lived next door to me for years, so we would have always cared for her, but it's just made her much, much more comfortable. It's made her last years ... So she wasn't scraping 'round for pennies. And, okay, I lost my dad ... but I had a wonderful mother. So it makes up for it, doesn't it? And some children don't have that luxury, do they?

I: **And I suppose you never knew any different, did you?**

R: Well you don't, do you? You only know what you've had. You don't miss what you've never had, like I didn't miss having a dad until I realised you got extra Christmas presents. [Laughter]. And it would have been nice on my wedding to have had my dad, really. She missed out on an awful lot, didn't she? My brother gave me away, so it was fine. Absolutely.



Fig. 1: Christina Claypole with a photograph of her mother and a drawing of her father in uniform. 25 June 2017.

In reply please quote:-

D.N.A. 3/C.S. /DD/4967
and address letter to:-
THE DIRECTOR OF NAVY ACCOUNTS,
(Branch 3),
ADMIRALTY, BATH.

ADMIRALTY,

5 May 1942.

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT

John Philip Kirton
Look. (S)

Official No. *C/MX 62679* Royal *navy*

is presumed by the Admiralty, for official purposes,
to have died on *1st April 1942 - On War Service.*

J. Murray

JM DIRECTOR OF NAVY ACCOUNTS

[Signature]

31 RRCCB.

Fig. 2: Letter from the Director of Navy Accounts to Christiane Kirton, Christina's mother, notifying her of her husband's death.



Commonwealth War Graves Commission
2 Marlow Road Maidenhead Berkshire SL6 7DX

Telegrams Comgraves Maidenhead

Telephone 0628 34221

Mrs C Kirton

Your reference

Our reference
ENQ 2 NR 1306

Date
13 June 1985

Dear Mrs Kirton

I am writing to you after having received a letter from your daughter on your behalf. I am able to give you the following information from our records.

Cook John Philip Kirton, C/MX 62679, serving with the Royal Navy on HM Submarine "Pandora" died on 1 April 1942, age 26. As he has no known grave but the sea he is commemorated on Panel 64, Column 2 of the Chatham Naval Memorial, Kent. He was the son of Edward and Mary Heslop Kirton.

I have pleasure in enclosing a general view photograph of the memorial with the Commission's compliments and I hope this proves to be of interest to you.

Yours sincerely

Nicola Robinson
for Director-General

Fig. 3: Letter from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission confirming the location where Christina's father, John Philip Kirton, is commemorated. 13 June 1985.



War Widows' Stories

History. Memories. Heritage.

An Interview with Joan Eggmore

12 May 2017

Conducted by Jeannie Benjamin



The War Widows'
Association
of Great Britain



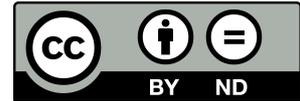
heritage
lottery fund

LOTTERY FUNDED



LIVERPOOL
JOHN MOORES
UNIVERSITY

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To do so, and for any other questions about this interview, how you may use it, or about the project, please contact Dr Nadine Muller via email (info@warwidowsstories.org.uk), or by post at the following addressing: John Foster Building, Liverpool John Moores University, 80-98 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, L3 5UZ.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

I = Interviewer

R = Respondent / Interviewee

[] = Clarification note

I: Okay, so first of all, I'd like to ask you a little bit about your background, where you were born and your childhood. Would you like to tell me about that?

R: Yes, I was born in North Kensington, in Tabbal Road. That ran parallel to Ladbroke Grove, and I lived there until I was about six. I had two older brothers and, eventually, we moved to Shepherd's Bush. I went to my first infant school in North Kensington and then we moved to Shepherd's Bush and I went to Wormholt Park School.

I: And your parents?

R: My parents ... Do you want their names?

I: No, not necessarily. Just what were they like? What did they do?

R: My father actually worked for the Stationery Office. At first, he was a paper worker, paper cutter, I think it was called, and eventually he became manager of the Stationery Office shop in Kingsway, a long time afterwards, of course. He had been in the First World War. He volunteered at the age of eighteen, and you might be amazed when I tell you he was a pacifist for the rest of his life.¹⁸ My brothers were not allowed any war-like toys. And eventually, because I became a pacifist mainly through him, I think, eventually I said, "I can't understand why you volunteered?" He made this amazing reply: "I joined the Army to convert them to socialism". So, you could say that was one big failure.

My mother was actually born in Wootton Bassett, in the West Country. Her father was a publican, and he eventually became the publican of the Cross Keys, which you've often seen when bodies have been brought back from Afghanistan, but not, of course, in his lifetime. But, I visited there quite a lot as a child, and I always remember the smell of this pub. It always smelt of musty upholstery, and you would recognise the same smell in some old cinemas in my young days, too. In my young days, there were also spittoons around. My mother's mother had died when she was only eighteen months old but my grandfather married three times, so she had older sisters who were almost substitute mothers to her. Then, eventually, my grandfather married a third time, and his third wife was even younger than some of his daughters from his first marriage. So, I always say

¹⁸ Respondent clarification: He had been gassed and blinded and sent back to the front when he recovered.

that I have hundreds of relations around the Swindon and Bassett area, but I don't know them anymore. [Laughter.] The ones I knew are no longer here.

I: So, you grew up surrounded by a lot of family?

R: Well, I was sort of the town girl and used to go down there and stay with my country cousins in school holidays, so I was a bit of a mixture. I can remember eventually I got old enough to be able to be sent down by train and in the charge of the guard. I don't know how they managed to let my parents know I'd arrived safely because none of us had phones, so I suppose they waited for the post. I can always remember, as we approached Reading on the train, coming back to Paddington, all those biscuit factories and also the sooty smell of London, the smoky smell of London, and I was always pleased to get back.

So eventually, in my day, you didn't do the 11 Plus, but some children did the scholarship. And I did take the scholarship [among] a few children at my school, but I only did well enough to pass [and] to be recommended to go to what was known as a secondary school then, but they were sort of the next scale up, if my parents paid for my books. I'm afraid, I actually heard my mother say, "Well, she'll be doing alright at a central school, after all she'll probably only go and get married". [Laughter.] Which, I'm afraid, happened. But I went to the central school, and I don't know if you've even heard of central schools. They were a kind of middle system of education [for] children who'd done quite well at elementary schools, but not well enough to go on to what would be termed grammar schools. So, I left school at 15 ½, having taken no exams, but I learned to type at school. We stayed on after school and I very quickly became a touch typist, which you never forget. I can go on my computer after all these years.

My first job was at Harrods, and I worked in the fur storage department. We were two floors under. Well, there's no fur department now. Two stories underground, and we were locked in because of all these valuable furs. There were six young men who were porters taking furs up and down to the fur department and they, sort of, protected me. I think I was very naïve and introverted, really, and they were very protective towards me. Eventually, I didn't want to stay there, and I eventually did get a job in the Civil Service when it was just pre-war, and I worked in the Ministry of Supply in Westminster. When the war started, we all had to have a suitcase ready, and I had to report to Kensal Rise Station each morning, and eventually they said, "You're not being evacuated. You're part of the skeleton staff in London, so report for work tomorrow". So, that was how I managed to stay in London for the whole of the war, and we all cared for each other. When the Blitz started, we would be late getting into work, and you never knew which way buses were going, but we could never really get down to work until everyone in the office was there, and sometimes they arrived very late.

I: How old were you when war broke out?

R: Seventeen. Nearly eighteen by then. Then, eventually, I decided that I didn't want to sit for goodness knows how long typing schedules for tanks to Russia all day long. The surprising thing is, myself and another girl in the office, we were quite close friends [and] we were chosen to teach all the extra typists that we had in, and some of them, I'm afraid, couldn't type. I remember I had to teach one woman who was extremely hard of hearing. She had a box, then, that she put on the desk, and every time I was trying to explain something she'd done incorrectly, she would switch it off so that she couldn't hear me. I got a bit tired of this and I thought, "I don't want to do this forever." But it was a reserved occupation, and I had decided that if I was going to see this war through, I wanted to have as little to do as possible with killing people, so that was when I decided

to do nursing training. I got accepted in an L.C.C. Hospital, Paddington, which no longer exists. It's not St Mary's. It was in Harrow Road, and I started my training there.

I: And what was that like?

R: Hard work. [Laughter.] Before a very short space of time, there were hospitals known as emergency hospitals, and they were outside London, and they were for long-stay patients or military patients. So it was part military, but we all had to go down there in groups from London hospitals. I was there in Epsom. That's Horton Emergency Hospital, which had been a mental hospital, as they were called then, and some of the old patients were kept on doing the menial tasks, doing the gardening, and the laundry, and everything. It was quite pleasant there. I quite liked Epsom, although I did used to go up to London quite a bit. [Laughter.] It wasn't that difficult, and I remember I always sat in the Ladies Only carriage going back, and they don't exist anymore.

Then we went back to London and it became even harder work.¹⁹ Not so much because of the Blitz, although, of course, it was pretty difficult during the V-1s and the V-2s, that's the doodlebugs [V1s], as they were called, and the rockets [V2s]. I became a theatre staff nurse, eventually, but I wasn't a staff nurse until the war ended. I trained after I finished my finals, which was 1945, just as the war ended. I became a theatre staff nurse. Then the lovely theatre sister who trained me left, and we had a new theatre sister and she didn't want anyone who had been trained by her [the previous theatre sister], so I went back to being a ward staff nurse.

I had actually known my husband by sight when I first worked at Harrods. He worked in the advertising department, and I actually knew my father-in-law in those days before I knew my husband because my father-in-law was the manager of a town despatch. This consisted of sending out vans from Harrods. Lady so and so would ring up and say, "I need my mink coat tonight. Please will you deliver it to me". And it would be up to him to deliver it. So, because I was the junior member of staff in the fur storage, I was always sent to Mr Eggmore, "Take this to Mr Eggmore and tell him Lady so and so wants it". And he would shout at me, and he'd say, "How can they expect me to find a van". [Laughter.] He always did it, of course, because he was a little bit of a coward. Lady Burbage and [Sir Richard] Burbage were the managing directors then, and he would kowtow to them. He'd been a buyer there before he was the town despatch manager, and eventually, when I got to know him as my father-in-law, I always used to think it was so funny because he was absolutely hen-pecked at home. I used to think of this man everyone used to ... "Oh, I've got to take it up to Mr Eggmore. I'm not taking it." [Laughter.]

Then I finished my training during the war, at the hospital, and I had met my husband again. Strangely enough, I saw him, and this was all very odd. One of my brothers was in Italy, and he'd come back and got married after the war ended, but then had to go back to Italy. We were sitting in the forecourt at Paddington Station, as it used to be, this great big square area, waiting for him to arrive, and I saw a young man and a young woman walking across, and I said, "Oh, I know that man. He works at Harrods. He's our despatch manager's son. Oh, it's lovely to see he's back". And it was strange because I was then pointing out to my parents their future son-in-law, only they didn't know. Eventually, I went to Harrods Club with a friend who still worked at Harrods, and my husband worked at Harrods before the war and he had returned as well. We used to go down to Harrods Club in the evening, and it was only tuppence a week when I first worked there.

¹⁹ Respondent clarification: Each group stayed for a few months and then returned to their London hospitals.

I used to go with them after the war, occasionally. I had a Saturday evening off, and I was going with two friends to Harrods Club, and we went in the bar, and there's one young man there, and these two young men greeted each other, as they did, "Ah, great to see you safely back". And these two greeted each other and we spent the evening together. As it happens, my friend's mother, who had been a Polish refugee long before the First World War, she decided that she was learning to drive and Reg, the young man who worked at Harrods, was teaching her, so we had a car. Nobody had a car in those days. So, we had a car and we drove into Harrods Club, so we gave Dougie, my husband[-to-be], a lift to Hammersmith, and that was it. I just thought, "Well, okay. He was nice". And Reg said, "You want to be careful. You're doing alright there, Joan". [Laughter.] I said, "I know that! I met him before the war".

Anyway, I was working on the children's ward and I got on very well with the ward sister there. I loved it on the children's ward. I loved bathing the babies every day. I was a staff nurse there, and she came in on Monday morning with a big box of red carnations, and this was from Dougie, who I'd only met again that [Saturday] evening. He used to hedge his bets a bit. But I don't know how I managed to thank him ... Perhaps I got him by phone. I can't remember that. But we did meet the next Saturday, but I had to meet him at Hammersmith Broadway, and he was with two friends at the Clarendon Pub – I don't know if it's still there – in case I didn't turn up. But I did turn up, and we went to the Kensington Odeon and we saw "A Matter of Life and Death". I remember that film. From then on, we saw each other all the time, when we possibly could.

I: So that was your first date?

R: Yes.

I: And his name was Dougie?

R: He was seven years older than me, so, of course, he'd been a young man before the war, and there was such a difference as well: those who'd been a young adult and those who had their adolescence, more or less as I did. There was quite a difference, and it was the same with my two brothers as well. We went out together, and I think we only went out two or three times and he said, "I think we'll get married in about six months' time." And I said, "What are you talking about? We've only just met". And we did, actually.

I: He didn't actually propose?

R: That was the proposal. [Laughter.] Actually, my parents were not disapproving of this, strangely enough, and so I used to go to his house, eating their rations, and he used to come to our house, eating our rations. Because he lived in Heston. It was his father's house that we lived in in Heston when we got married in 1947, and then David, my son, was born in September 1948, but his first Christmas, we went to my parents. My mother-in-law died six weeks after we got married, so I never really knew her. She was rather sweet. So, we took my father-in-law with us to my parents' home, and Dougie had a heart attack on Christmas night, I'm afraid. But, as it happens, there was a doctor living in our road, and ... this would never happen now ... my parents went along and Dr Ross came along, and they became friends, the two of them and he said, "What on earth were you doing in the Army? I wouldn't even pass you for a life insurance. What were they thinking of having you in, because you've got mitral stenosis"/ Actually, he did know he had mitral stenosis by this time.

I: So, before that ... What was he doing in the Army?

R: Oh, right. Now, I never understand this because I never got the full story and strangely enough, I was looking at all the papers last night. He was a fantastically intelligent, creative young man, and he was put in the Pioneer Corps, and that was where all the ones who were really a bit mentally retarded were put, and I'm afraid I had suspicions. Now, he wasn't Jewish, first of all. I must say that. But people thought he was Jewish. He had very swarthy skin, and you know people have these pre-conceived ideas, and in the early days of the war, he was treated in a racist, anti-Semitic way. People used to come up to him and say, "Why aren't you in the Army? Our boys are fighting for your people". Now, what do you say when someone gives an anti-Semitic remark like that to you when you're not Jewish? I mean, he was never going to say, "I'm not Jewish". Because he knew they would probably say, "You're a liar".

Strangely enough, my friend, who I've already talked about, with the mother who was Polish: she was Jewish, so I'd grown up with Jewish families. I used to go to their home on Atonement Day, and I would do the shopping because they weren't allowed to touch money on Atonement Day. I used to go to all their festivals, I went to their weddings, so I knew lots of Jewish people who had blue eyes and fair hair, but because my husband's hair was virtually black, with very, very, dark brown eyes, and he did have a slightly larger nose and people actually thought he was Jewish. I did actually say to a friend in later years, in Bath, actually, "Do you think that he was put in the Pioneer Corps because they thought he was Jewish?" And he said, "Yes, quite likely". Now, he had rheumatic fever as a child and it affected his heart, and he was very, very short-sighted. That could only be the other reason for not putting him in an active regiment, but somehow or another, someone must have noticed that he should not have been in the Pioneer Corps, and he was then put into a unit where they were all creative: artists, graphic designers, printers. And it was just right for him. He did spend the war using his talents as a draughtsman, and he was more of a draughtsman than an artist.

I: In this country?

R: No, in India, and then Burma. He was in Burma, so I've been to Burma, which I'll mention in a minute. They were in India when the war ended and then, of course, all of us suddenly remembered that there was still fighting going on in Burma because it was known as the "forgotten army". They were sent to go right up to the north, Kohima, and they went into Burma, and they went all the way down the Irrawaddy River with their equipment, their printing equipment, on a boat, and arrived in Rangoon. And then they were doing map reproductions. So, he frequently went up taking photographs because they needed new maps nearly every day, so they were making maps. He obviously was with the right people for him. Some of them were much older, but they were within call-up age, and they were using their talents as artists and designers, and that was just right for him, really.

He was the sort of person who really should have been somewhere like Bletchley Park. He did the *Telegraph* crossword, which they used as a test. He played bridge. He did all those things, but, despite that, he was put in the Pioneer Corps, which was really where they put people who really couldn't cope with being in the Army and learning all the drill, but that worked out. So, really, I have to say, he didn't have a terrible war. I mean it was pretty terrible getting into Burma, but they didn't have any casualties. They did have one death, and that was one of the local people on the boat going down to Rangoon. Then, of course, when the war ended. He was okay. They got the prisoners of war back first, and also the serving men who'd had an awful time. So, he didn't get back to this country until well into 1946, actually.

I: So, how long were you apart from each other?

R: I hardly knew him then because we weren't married until after the war. I just knew him as someone who worked at Harrods, who was the son of Mr Eggmore. He got back to this country in 1946, and got his job back at Harrods, so he was working at Harrods when we met again at Harrods Club. Sorry, I've gone backwards and forwards a bit.

Oh yes, Dr Ross, who lived in our street and came to see him, said, "I'm going to get you into the National Heart Hospital to see what they can do for you". And he was sent to National Heart Hospital, and they actually said, "Well, he's got valve disease". And at that time, there hadn't been any heart surgery. Whoever dreamt that they would do heart transplants, but Dr Brock, who was knighted eventually, had started repairing valves, and I had a letter from him to say that he'd done six quite satisfactorily, and these people were having a much better life. They were mostly females, as it happened, but he said that he would consider Dougie for his next valve repair. But it was too late by then.

He'd been home from the National Heart Hospital for about a week, and he wasn't getting any better and quite suddenly, one evening, he really became very ill, and I could actually hear his heart beating. In those days, you rang for the doctor, and the doctor came and sent him straight into West Middlesex Hospital, and he had bacterial endocarditis. No cure at all then. Eventually, streptomycin would have helped, but penicillin doesn't help, and I was told that he wouldn't recover, so he died after about a week, which was a pretty awful week because I had a young baby as well. My poor son was parked out to goodness knows who would look after him while I was going backwards and forwards to the hospital by bus. Three buses I had to get to get there. No-one with a car who could take me, and I wasn't with him when he died. He died one night. I didn't want to leave him, and, strangely enough, my brother and sister-in-law came to visit him that same evening, and I said, "I don't really want to leave him, but I don't know what to do. I've got to get back to David".

My father-in-law was looking after him then, and my father-in-law really knew nothing much about babies. I doubt whether he could have changed a nappy. One neighbour was very useful, but it was getting quite late, and my brother said to my sister-in-law, "You could take Joan home and stay with her for the night", We didn't have a phone but a very kindly neighbour allowed me to use her phone, and I went off to make my usual phone call. I said to, I can't remember the lady's name, I said, "I'm afraid to ring up. I'm afraid of what I'm going to be told". And she did the ringing for me, and she told me that he had actually died in the night, so that was it. He was my father-in-law's only child and, yet, my father-in-law was really very kind. He was sort of kind at first, but eventually, I think, because he'd retired by then, he was enjoying himself going out playing bowls and things, and he wasn't really all that interested. He was more interested in me, strangely enough, than in my son, who was his only grandchild.

David never really felt close to his grandfather. He was very close to my father, and that's where he learned all about trade unions, from my father. My father was also Father Imperial for the chapel of the printing union, the printing paper workers. It doesn't exist anymore. So, he was brought up in quite a union background, and I do often wonder how my son might have developed because my husband was actually talking about sending him to a private school, and I was horrified at this. I thought, "We're going to have some battles over this. I don't want him going to a private school". [Laughter.] And, I do often wonder, "Would David be the same person?" I have always thought that the tragedy was worse for my son than for me, to grow up without a father, who he didn't remember. He had absolutely no memory of him at all, and it was obvious at first that he missed someone. There was something missing from his life. You know, he was always looking around, and that sort of thing, "Where's that person gone who was my dad?" Because he didn't do things like bathing him, and things like that which fathers didn't do much in those days.

Obviously, my son must have got his intelligence from his dad because we eventually moved back to North Kensington, and he went to a school called Oxford Gardens School. I don't know whether you knew Oxford Gardens at all? Which was considered to be a very good primary school, but one side of it was a terrible slum area and the other side ... We moved into a fairly lower middle-class house, so he mixed with all sorts of children at this school, and he was fortunate enough to have his first teacher. He went to a day nursery while I was working because I had to go back to work, and he mixed with all sorts of children at school, and he did very well, and he was with the same teacher, and each year she moved with them, so she had ten children that she managed to keep, and they became absolutely devoted.

Now, I've got to go back again. When he was born, I had to go in hospital to stay because I had very high blood pressure, and I met a young woman in there, and our sons were born on the same day, and because we'd been in the annexe together, they put us together. I had all sorts of complications, but I was put in with her and she went home after about three days. John, her child, weighed five pounds, and my son weighed ten pounds one ounce. I didn't see him until he was three days old, which I've always blamed for making him so independent. He's never been a clinging person, and I've always blamed that we never met until he was three days old. And, I think, with my brothers, I'd known them all my life, but I haven't known my son all his life. [Laughter.] I know I was getting a bit depressed because I thought there must be something terribly wrong with him. It didn't matter that my parents said, "We keep seeing him. He's lovely. He's beautiful". But I hadn't seen him. I was still unconscious and, eventually, the others in my ward of four, they'd gone, and I was the only one left there, and they said I couldn't go home yet: "Your stitches are septic", and all the rest of it.

A young woman doctor, and there weren't many young women doctors, happened to pop in and she said, "How are you? Where's your baby?" Because the babies were with us, and I said, "I haven't seen him yet". And she said, "Is your baby that very large baby?" They never even put a label on him. They had him in the premature babies' unit, but never put a label on him. They had to send to the children's ward for a nightie, and I hadn't met him. And she said, "How could they do that do you? What nonsense. I'm going along straight away". And she came back with this large baby with his head lolling on one side and she said, "Meet your son." [Laughter.] "Oh, yes. Hello." And he stayed with me forever after that, and I used to talk to him, and I used to tell him all sorts of things by myself. Strangely enough, I did examine him all over, and the doctor said, "How could the ward sister do that?" But they did those sorts of things, and nobody ever said, "What a terrible thing to have done to you to not even see your baby or even taken you to see him". And there was I, a trained nurse, and I was attending a special clinic for nurses as well when I was pregnant, and they didn't discover how large he was.

So, we got to be quite friendly, I suppose, before we went home together, but I was very depressed for quite a long time. Then, all of a sudden, my husband bought a puppy as a present for me. Oh dear! My mother was furious about that, having a puppy to train at the same time as a young baby. Although, I have to say, my son was very little trouble. He slept all through the night. He was so used to being alone, I suppose, he spent three days without anyone petting him in any way, so he wasn't difficult to put down and go to sleep. Sometimes he woke up in the middle of the night, but not very often. [Laughter.] So, that wasn't too bad, and then I began to feel better, and this is very strange ... I've told my son about this and I feel daft remembering this ... I remember it was about this time of the year. The blossom was out on the trees, and the dog was getting a bit sensible, and I used to have him at the end of the pram, and people would stop me and say, "Oh, I haven't seen your baby. Oh, what a lovely puppy". And he was a golden Cocker Spaniel, and I'd realise they'd gone off and they hadn't looked at the baby at the other end.

It didn't bother David. He was cooing away there quite happily, but I remember on this particular day, the sun was like today, and the blossom was on the trees, and we had it all down this road in Heston, and I was pushing the pram, and the dog was walking along quite sensibly, and things seemed to be going right, and I felt really quite happy and better. Quite suddenly I was better. A man came along, he was probably only middle-aged, but I thought he was older, and he said, "What a lovely picture! You and your baby and the dog under the blossom". And I always remember that because that really lifted my self-esteem when I'd been feeling so down, and I've no idea who the man was, but he made me feel better. So, that lifted our day, but that didn't last for long. We managed to get a holiday on the Isle of Wight, and we were there on his first birthday, actually, David. So, we did manage to get a holiday on the Isle of Wight when he was nearly a year old, and then things went down from there really.

I: That was the only holiday you had all together?

R: Well, we'd had short weekends down with some friends in Eastbourne, and that sort of thing. We didn't have a proper honeymoon. About two or three days in Eastbourne, I think.

I: You haven't mentioned much about your wedding?

R: Well, of course, I would have liked to have just got married, but you know what mums are like? So, we had to have lots of people and, "We must invite her. We didn't invite her". [Laughter.] As long as I had a few friends there and Dougie had a few of his friends there. His mother couldn't come. She wasn't well enough, and I got married at St John's Church Notting Hill in Ladbrooke Grove. We did have a church nearer to us, called St Helen's Church, but that had been bomb damaged. It was repaired eventually. So we got married at St John's Church, and the reception was at my home, and they managed to do all of that. They managed to get food and everything, and neither of us wanted a great big thing. It wasn't just me. Of course, I had to have a white dress [laughter] and we learned that they were hiring out dresses from Lime Grove Studios, so I had a rented dress. My best friend, I wanted her to be a bridesmaid, but for some reason ... She didn't object, my family didn't object, but someone raised some objection because she was Jewish, I'm afraid.

So, eventually, everyone thought I ought to have a bridesmaid, so I had a little relation of Dougie's, who, strangely enough, her father had been in the Navy, his cousin, and he'd been killed during the war. So, she was on her own, without a dad as well, but I'd lost touch with her mother, I'm afraid, because when you're so busy working all the time, you do lose touch, and I've lost touch with people since I've been here. I'm afraid most people who were my friends are no longer here anyway, but I do have some nice friends locally, some nice kind friends.

I: When you were with your son and he was obviously very young ... Can you say a bit more what it was like bringing up a child as a single mum?

R: It was very, very difficult. I have to say, I was a bit stubborn here. My mother wanted to look after him. At first, my friend, Leah, her mother worked for Jaeger's work rooms and she trained us, me and Leah, who had a little girl by this time, to be finishers for Jaeger's, and I learned how to do finishing. I got six and six a dress, and I could take it home to do, but it became very difficult. I lived with my parents for a while. I left my father-in-law's home and lived with my parents.

My mother was so possessive. She was even possessive before I had David. My sister-in-law had her son, well, he's still around, let's call him my nephew, eleven months before

David. She came home with this baby, Colin. I hadn't had David then and my mother took him over. My mother did all the bathing, and she said, "Oh, she won't be able to do it properly". My mother wasn't very nice to her daughters-in-law at all. And my daughter-in-law tells me that I'm the best mother-in-law in the world. That's because I've never bossed her around.

So, I decided that, perhaps, I don't know, I think, maybe for our future, I did do the right thing. I didn't want my mother taking over, and I did decide to go back to nursing which was, perhaps, a mistake because I found it very difficult. So, I gave up the sewing job and went. You could just get a job, go to the hospital and say, "I'd like a job as a staff nurse". And they took you on. So, I decided I would like to work part-time. I went to Hammersmith Hospital and they took me on, and they'd only just started with part-timers, so they took me on as a part-timer.

I: How old was David?

R: David would be in his second year by then. He was nearly two when I decided to go back to nursing. Just about two, I should think. So, I worked part-time and, at first, well, the part-timers grew, so, the full-time staff became a bit resentful to the fact that that meant they had fewer evenings off because we mostly worked 8:30 to 5:00, or 3:00, or something like that. So, they decided that we all had to do one evening a week, but I didn't have to work at the weekends, only if there was something terrible going on. So, I worked Monday to Friday, but I had to do the one late evening which meant I did have to let them look after David, but that was alright, just for an evening. But I managed to get him into a nursery, and the strange thing about this is: David's very first day in the nursery, he was used to being looked after by other people, so there was no clinging to me or anything like that.

I deposited him at the nursery and as I was coming out, there's this young woman coming in with her little boy, and it was John, who was born the same day as David in Middlesex in Twickenham and he was back there living, and he was going to the same nursery. Also, the other terrible coincidence was that Johnny's dad had been in the Navy, but he was discharged through ill health, so he got a pension straight away and our two husbands used to meet when we were both in hospital in the annexe, and they'd go off and had a drink together, and they became friendly. But, of course, I hadn't seen them since those early days in hospital, and Johnny's dad had also died. He just went to work one day and never came back. That was a hard thing. So, Johnny was at the nursery with David, and they became very close friends. They were close friends all the time they were in primary school, and they were in the same exclusive ten that Miss Pearson had in her select few.

I do know, though, that David fell in love with this teacher, and when she was getting married, she told them her married name, and I can't remember what it was. They went back after she'd got married, and the children were calling out their names. She told me this, and she would say, "John Henwood". And Johnny would say, "Yes, Mrs Smith", or whatever her name was, and then she would say, "David Eggmore". And he would say, "Yes, Miss Pearson". He refused to call her "Mrs". Eventually, she left the school, perhaps she was pregnant, I don't remember. But she lived in the suburbs somewhere, not far away, say, not as far as Windsor, I think. And, eventually, when she left, the two of them actually travelled together on their own to spend a day with her. Well, we had all these arrangements, one of us saw them on the train, and she met the train and that was their first travelling alone when they were only about seven or eight. Maybe they were just going into the Juniors, as it was called then.

David, was never one for going out to play. I used to have to push him out almost, but we eventually got a flat from the Housing Association, which, strangely enough, backed on to my parents' home, so we could go over in the mornings to my parents, and this was just a lovely coincidence and we were very happy there. Things got better with my parents, and my mother then decided that she shouldn't be so bossy about me and my son. So David used to climb over, and Johnny would come and play in our back garden, and they were still quite friendly the whole time at junior school, but when they left, David went to a direct grammar school. I got a phone call at school one day, at work, well, I was in the Civil Service then, while he was at school, to say could I go and see the headmaster. I went to see the headmaster, and – I hope my memory serves me right here – he told me that David, with two other children in the whole of London, had got 99% for their 11 Plus, and he said, "I can recommend him for Christ's Hospital [School]".

I thought about this. I didn't want him to go to a boarding school. I didn't think he'd be happy at a boarding school, so he then said, "What about Latymer Upper?" That's Hammersmith. "Or City of London?" Well, City of London would have meant a much longer travel, and so he went to Latymer Upper. One of the teachers at the primary school, who was a teacher who did the emergency training after the war, with two other teachers there, and they were fantastic. He said, "Tell him to let me know what university he gets to". So, he did, eventually. York he went to and he did English literature. I'm afraid he should have got a First, but I don't think he worked hard enough. My granddaughter has got a double First from Edinburgh, and so I always like to think she's inherited her grandfather's genes as well.

I: All this time you were working? You mentioned the nursing, and then the Civil Service.

R: Yes, I started nursing and, as you can imagine, it was difficult enough keeping myself because I knew absolutely nothing about applying for a War Widows' Pension. Nobody ever mentioned it anywhere. I got a Widowed Mothers' Pension, but – this sounds ridiculous – if you earned more than £2, it got subtracted from the pension and, believe it or not, I didn't get as much as £3, but it was worth me working and losing something from my pension for, say, about ten shillings or fifteen shillings extra. It actually made a difference. Then I thought, I can't carry on like this because I've got to look after this child and buy him shoes and everything. So I thought, I'll just have to give up nursing, and I think I must have gone to an employment agency, and they said, "You've been a typist in your time. Would you like to take a test?" So, I said, "Yes". And they said, "Would you be interested in going back in the Civil Service?" I then got a job in Shepherd's Bush, and I could actually walk there because it was almost quicker than going by train. If I'd gone by train from Latimer Road Station, I'd have gone to Goldhawk Road and I would have had to walk all the way back. So, I used to walk to work, which didn't do me any harm.

I worked in the Inland Revenue and I worked there for twelve years, and it was so boring, and I'd completely forgotten. This was my plan: I wasn't going to establish myself, and I thought that, eventually, I would do something else. I did all the proficiency tests which brought in a bit more money, and I trained as an audio-typist in the Estate Duty Office, not the Income Tax Office. When David got to university, I thought, "Right, it's my turn now". And, of course, he went to university at the right time. Whoever thought that those days would be so much better than today? No fees and not a bad grant, either. He lived on his grant, and he drove a car as well. I think he got a little bit of money in giving lifts back to London, but he did drive a car the whole time, and he passed his test before I did, whilst he was still at school.

So, we were alright. And can you imagine? This is what happened and my granddaughter: although she went to a Scottish university, other people had to pay the fees and kept her as well, and this is all these years later and you think that those were the sort of golden days, almost. I remember he got grants for other things. He helped with a dig on one of the Orkney Islands, and he got a grant to cover doing that in his holiday.

I: So, you said it's your turn now?

R: Then I was going, and I had already started going to some classes at the City Literary Institute. Have you heard of that? It still exists, more for adult education and giving you proper courses. I'd done a drama course and then, more or less at the same time, this course came up called, "Fresh Horizons", and this was for people, mainly women, who'd left school when they should really have stayed on, and so I started doing all these refresher courses. We even had a ballet class, which was lovely, and that was to keep you exercised, and there were showers there that you could use afterwards. Eventually, after the first year, I had to see the tutor, who probably wasn't much older than me, and she said, "Have you decided what you would like to do?" And I said, "Well, I've done nursing, so, I would like to do some kind of social work. So, could you tell me what I could do?" So, she said, "Have you ever thought of teaching?" And I said, "Well, of course I have, but I haven't got the qualifications". And she said, "Yes, you have. It's open now to mature students".

And this all happened at the right time and I remember I had to go to the University of London and take this what I call a giant IQ test. It lasted forever and you kept turning the page. And you never were told the result. I don't know what the percentage was, and there were some questions that I found quite difficult, but perhaps I'd make up for it in the next round, and I think that's probably what happened. They decided that a lot of us there ... And there was a great mixture, there were people older than me, even.

I: How old were you then?

R: I was early forties by then. Perhaps about 43 by the time I started this, but there were people older than me. People who'd been in the police and retired early and decided to do teaching, and quite young girls, even, who'd left school, and people like me, my age, who'd left school before the war, and people who'd had a much better education than I'd had, but hadn't got the matriculation, as it was known as in those days. So, then once you'd been told that you'd passed it, it was then up to you to get in. So you were given three choices, and I chose ... it was called Battersea College of Education but the college was at Manresa House, the other side of Richmond Park. It had been a Jesuit college and it was there where Byron got stabbed by Lady someone or another, Lady Caroline Lamb. That building.

I loved it there. I used to drive through Richmond Park every day and the reason I chose that one which took mature students, well, I think they all took mature students by this time, was because they were going to do a drama course, which is what I was interested in. I'd always been interested in the theatre. So they weren't doing it then, but it was going to start next year when you had to start a main subject. So, I was there right at the beginning of this drama course, and I was the only oldie there, so I was there with all these youngsters. They were great. They accepted me as an old person, and I did feel a bit of an outcast amongst them sometimes, but I did all the things that they did. I didn't pass with glowing colours at all, but I passed. Then, I had done a bit of supply during the school holidays, the college ... No, I think we must have started our holidays before school was out, so I'd only done a very little bit of supply, which you were allowed to do in your last year.

So then I was just given a job, and it was almost like when I went back to nursing. There was a vacancy at Norwood Green Junior School, and I got in there. Well, by this time, of course, my son had finished university and was back in London. I was living in what had been my father-in-law's house. He had died in the meantime, but David didn't particularly want to live there. Because, of course, with my husband dying, it became David's house, not mine, because David was my father-in-law's next of kin, so it didn't become my house, but I had to do all the work about it, doing all the going out and swearing by oath, and all that kind of thing. David then thought that he'd like a spell out of London. I did my year's probation and passed that, and I had decided that I would like a spell out of London, so I did give in my notice, but I was taken on immediately at Heston Infants School for a year, for a term's supply, because their teacher was going into hospital, so that was when I met the younger children, and I certainly loved teaching the younger ones, although I quite liked the juniors too.

So, I eventually decided that I would find somewhere, and David said, "I'm not selling this house. So [until] you're sorted, I'm not going to sell the house". So, he had to sell it. Of course, he was over 21 by then, and I got a job, eventually, down in Plymouth. I had a friend who lived in Plymouth, which was a connection, and I'd known her in London, as well. I couldn't get a job in Plymouth, but then I looked further afield, and I thought, "Well, Cornwall is only just across the bridge. I'll try Cornwall". And I got a job in Saltash Junior School in Cornwall, and moved down to Plymouth. I managed to get a flat. Well, you wouldn't really call it a flat. It was an annexe in a Georgian mansion in Plymouth, and when I told people where I lived they said, "But that's a Georgian mansion". And I said, "Yes, but I live in the servants' quarters". And I had to use the back door. I think the owner found this was economically better to include me in his rates rather than to have separate rates.

So, I had to use the backdoor, and he had to have my post, which did annoy me slightly. Again, I thought, "I don't want to live like this". It wasn't a particularly nice place to live, but I was allowed to take both my cats, so, I decided I would try and buy a house. In the meantime, David had given me some money from the sale of the house, so that we could both buy a house. By this time, we were financially alright and, at last, I'm a teacher and he's got quite a good job, and a good income, and he was paid a salary from Camden, but he got extra from the union because it was one of the biggest branches of Unison in the country. It had thousands of members, and he had a staff, even. So, by then, we were financially alright, and I found a little house in Plymouth which I quite liked, and I liked living in Plymouth. You can get out onto the moors in about ten minutes.

But, unfortunately, I did not get on very well with my headmaster. I was a bit of a thorn in his side because I realised that I had not learned to be a yes-woman, and I would disagree over certain things, and he didn't like it at all. I can't blame it on the Cornish because he wasn't Cornish. The Cornish actually treated me as a foreigner, but I wasn't the only one there. There were three of us from Plymouth, and we all used to think we needed our passports to go over the bridge. I don't think it's quite so bad now, but I did have problems. The cleaner of my classroom used to complain about me non-stop if she found a tiny bit of paint anywhere. The person I got on with very well was the caretaker, who is, actually, usually the person who runs the school. He was a Londoner, and he was always on my side, but I did have some teachers there on my side. But I realised, amongst the older teachers there, who were men, they definitely went on their knees, almost, to the headmaster, and I didn't. I thought, "I can't stay here forever. I'm going back to London". [Laughter.]

Which I did, and this is when I decided I was going back to London, but I hadn't given in my notice, but I was looking for a job first. I'm not quite that reckless. I thought I would have to sell the house when another strange thing happened when I decided I was going.

Some people called to see me and said, "We hear you're moving; can we buy your house?" [Laughter.] So, I didn't have to use an estate agent. They had lived a few doors down the road, and they had moved to South Africa and the didn't like it, and they came back. I hadn't known them before, but it was only a few years earlier and they wanted to live in the same street, and they called to see me and said, "Can we buy your house?" And they made an offer which was more than I'd paid for it, but houses had gone up a bit, and I'd lived there for four years. So, that was solved.

I: Would that be in the 1970's?

R: This was 1977, and I remember it well. David and I started looking for houses around the school. Well, again, it was fairly middle-class one side and a council estate the other, but the children went to the school. So, we started off a bit too high, and they were houses that I could never afford, so we started looking a bit further away, and it was rather strange. The penny dropped eventually because it's in Southall, beginnings of Southall, and people would open the door and say, "Have you come to see our house?" And they'd welcome us in, and then we would realise the next-door neighbours were immigrants, and they'd been told by friends, "Don't go selling your house to an immigrant. We want more white people here". And the penny dropped, and I thought, "No, I'm not buying your house".

And again, it was another piece of luck. We were looking at my mother's local paper and I was looking at houses for sale, privately, because I'd sold my house that way and it said something about the cottage near the canal in Glade Lane. And I said, "Do you know where Glade Lane is?" To my mother, and, no, she'd never heard of it. Well she didn't live that close. I think I happened to go to the school where I was going to teach the next day, for some reason. It was holidays by this time. Well, it was only half-term. That was it, and I'd gone to the school and I said, "Do you happen to know where Glade Lane is?" And it was Mrs Gumbleton, who was the caretaker, and she said, "I live there". And she said, "Are you looking for a house? Number so and so is up for sale". Well, I'd also seen this advertised, so I went along and it was a bit of a broken-down, cottage so I did have a lot of work done on it, but it was my price range.

The woman who was selling it was, obviously, trying to fiddle in some way and I never again found out what it was she was trying to fiddle because she was pretending that she lived there, but neighbours eventually told me that she'd never lived there. She was saying, "We had the fridge there". And all that sort of thing. The ceiling was brown because the man who'd lived there used to smoke non-stop, but it was in my price range and it was within two minutes walking distance to school. I didn't have any expenses to get to school, and I was then getting a London Scale 2 salary, and then, while I was still in Cornwall, the union rep said, "Have you applied for this extra grant up the scale you can get because you've brought up a child?" And I said, "Well, I haven't heard of that one". And he said, "Well, you can just apply for them". So, by the time I got back to London, a cheque dropped on my doorstep: £3,000 back pay because I'd brought up a child, and I was perfectly honest, I said I wasn't a full-time mother. I couldn't ever be a full-time mother, but they gave me this grant.

I: Who gave you that money?

R: Well, I was entitled to it, apparently. I was up the scale a bit because I'd done nursing, so that proved I'd done exams and things. I didn't start off at Scale 0, and then I went up the scale a bit more. With a teacher's salary, you got all these extra bits that moved you up the scale. So, I could afford then to have quite a lot of work done on my little cottage. Then, of course, I worked at the school just across the bridge of the canal for ten years. It was a First School, then, so the children I taught were actually the same as first-year

juniors which I'd taught in Saltash, and they then decided to change it back, and by this time, I had retired. We were, then, strangely enough, overstaffed, and each year, the Head used to see me, and she'd say, "I know what you're going to say, but I've still got to say this to you. You are over fifty. You could apply for premature retirement". I think that's what they called it. And she said, "I know what you're going to say: that you don't want to retire".

But, strangely enough, I got red kidney bean poisoning, and I was really quite ill, and for the first time in teaching I had to take time off, and I wasn't at all well. When I went back, I said, "I've been thinking about this, and I've been thinking about ... Perhaps, I might look into this offer". And she was very good and said, "I don't want you to do anything in a hurry". And I said, "Well, really, it's totally unfair that you might have to lose a younger teacher because we are now over-staffed, when I could retire". So I said, "If I can retire and do supply teaching, continue doing supply teaching, I think I can manage that". And I had to go and see the union rep. He assisted on that, and he worked it all out the same as I had, what I would be getting. So, I decided to accept this, but then, of course, I was always going back to the school as supply. [Laughter.]

I: The same school?

R: Yes. I went to other local schools as well, but I quite liked doing supply teaching because you didn't have to do all that much paperwork, and I even did nursery sometimes. And again, meeting Asian families in the nursery, you didn't really do much in the way of teaching, but you do sort of get all the children together first. There were other people there to keep an eye on me and watching me, though I was doing the right thing. Then it came to playing with the toys because most of the children were by this time children of mostly Indian families, and I'd say, "You can go and play with the toys now". And the little girls would stay put, and all the little boys would go and grab the bicycles and the trolleys and the trains, and then the little girls would get up and play with all the toy saucepans and ironing boards. It was really a lesson in female emancipation to come, and I used to try and encourage them.

So, when I had been in the Junior school, before retiring, a teacher of the same year happened to be an Indian, but she was unusual. She was well in her forties and unmarried. She had refused to accept an arranged marriage. They'd find men, and she'd put them off, I expect. "No, no, I'm not marrying him". So she came to this country, and she was very independent. She wasn't a middle-aged Indian lady doing all the housework at all. She had an older brother, who was a nice person, apparently quite well-known. He worked in America, and he used to come and see her. She was buying her own house – I think it was a maisonette in Ealing – and she didn't like all these boys coming first, and I think she was a bit anti-man in a way. So, she said, "I'm going to start having a selective discrimination". So, I said, "Well, yes. I think I'm going to do something like that too". But they weren't so bad by this age, actually, about seven or eight, but hands would go up and I thought, I'm not being unkind to boys, but I would mostly choose the girls first, but I would know the children who I ought to encourage to answer as well, but Jarinda was probably stricter than I was.

So, we made these girls so independent of boys that when I eventually retired and they'd grown up, most of them were at Reading, because they could get home. The girls at university that I would meet later were at Reading University, and I'd be driving along Jersey Road where I lived, and young women would come driving out of a side road and I'd look and I'd think, "Yes, this is what Jarinda and I did, and they're coming first. They had learned to assert themselves." [Laughter.]

I: So, you did all this supply teaching until you were aged seventy?

R: Yes, and I apparently ought to have stopped at 67. Well, I worked at other schools as well and I also did a bit of Teaching English as a Second Language, which I quite enjoyed. That was fun, but it was a bit difficult. I had to get to Hayes, and I even had a childminder I took with me, that was supplied as well by the council, and she looked after the children of the ladies, although we did have one man. It was mostly local schools. I had my favourite schools, and I didn't work every day, but sometimes a term's supply would come up and I did have a permanent half-day at my local school just across the bridge, so I kept in touch all the time. It came to the end of the school year, and I was nearly seventy. I hadn't decided to give up but I thought I maybe had to, and we got into October and the phone rang one day, and it was the Deputy Head from upstairs, the Seniors. It all became one school, eventually, they went back to being one school again.

I: First, Middle, and Upper?

R: He rang me and said, "Do you think you could possibly come in this afternoon?" And, actually, I couldn't, but I can't remember why and I said, "I'm very sorry. I can't manage this afternoon". But I said, "I thought that you'd finished with me now that I'm seventy?" And he said, "Don't be ridiculous. You can't possibly be seventy". And I said, "Well, I am". So, I got worried and thought I would check up on this, so, I rang up the Education Department, and I said that I'd been a supply teacher and they said, "Well, actually, you should have retired at sixty-seven, but we didn't like to tell you". [Laughter.] So, I said, "Well, I decided that you weren't going to employ me anymore, but then John rang me and asked me whether I could go in today". So, I said, "Well, I'll tell them not to ring me anymore then".

I: You were still in London?

R: Yes, then it became very, very difficult because I didn't live near [public transport] and would have to go under the railway, the mainline railway, under the tunnel which everyone called, "Devil's Tunnel", to get to the Uxbridge Road, or walk along the towing path to get anywhere near public transport, or drive to Osterley Station, which was my nearest, actually, or Boston Manor, but it became so difficult to find parking spaces. I used to do some voluntary work. I did some voluntary work for the National Peace Council, which no longer exists, and that was near the Angel, and I had to get there and I found the best way was actually spending a bit of money because my fee ticket didn't cover the local trains, you know, the Western Region, but I could get a train from Hanwell, King's Cross, and then a bus to do this to get to the Angel. But it became so difficult, and someone damaged the bridge over the canal, so I couldn't drive over there, and no-one wanted to take liability for repairing it, and I don't know if it's been repaired now? So, that was closed to traffic, except where they allowed lorries and vans and things to go over, or in case of a fire. I think you could go over but they had these locked bridges.

I thought, "I don't really want to stay here forever". And I had, in the meantime, met up with someone I knew during the war, as it happened, and he was a boyfriend of mine during the war, and I hadn't seen him for years and years, and I went to the Strikes School open day in Essex. Somewhere I've got a book about it. The children had gone on strike in this school in 1914 because they objected to the way their Head and her husband were being treated by the Squire, and this became a famous school. They used to have an open day and it was organised by, I think, the NUT [National Union of Teachers], and a man I knew, he and his wife were friends, they were both teachers. He used to organise a coach trip every year to this place. I don't think it's Ditchling. It's somewhere in Essex, I think. And they had a big open day, but it was organised by the NUT. It was a sort of union day, and it only cost £7, I recall, and off we went there.

Now, this friend, Stan, who I'd known during the war, he was working for a Peace Service unit, and that's how I met him. He was a conscientious objector, and he came to London to help us townies during the Blitz, so he had a pretty tough time. They were doing rescue work and First Aid, and they ran a rest centre as well, in Paddington. I knew that he belonged to the Agricultural Workers' Union, in fact he was their Secretary for a while. That was part of the GWT, the big main union.

I: The GMB?

R: No, it was one of the big unions, and it became amalgamated with it. There's no separate Agricultural Workers' Union now. It wouldn't be the NUF. That was farmers. Anyway, I had thought once or twice that I would go to the CND [Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament] meeting in Tavistock Square that Jeremy Corbyn always organised, and that was how I got to know him. He wouldn't remember me, although he might remember the name because he possibly knows David, my son. He always organised this, and I used to look 'round at all these old men who'd been conscientious objectors, and I often wondered, "I wonder if any of them are Stan?" And I couldn't see anyone like him, but I went to this strike day outing. I saw a stall of the Agricultural Union, and I looked and there were about four elderly men sitting along there, and I thought, "I don't think any of those are Stan". But I did ask, and I said, "Do you happen to know a Stan Heywood?" And they said, "Oh, we know him". But the man who had organised the outing overall, I'd actually met but never mentioned it to him earlier, and he had worked for the Agricultural Workers' Union as well. So, they said, "Go and ask so and so". And they said, "We don't know where Stan is living, but he's around". So, I went to ask this man, and he said, "Have you got a shopping list in your hand bag on the back of an old envelope?" And I said, "More than likely". [Laughter.] So, I found an old envelope and he said, "I will give this to him, and I'll ask him to write to you". [Laughter.] He said, "He's living in some awful place called Nailsea, and he doesn't like it". [Laughter.] "You'll cheer him up if you ring him up". He's probably never heard of me, this man I'm talking to, but I did eventually hear from him [Stan].

I: He wrote to you in London?

R: Yes. And what had happened, it was seven weeks afterwards ... What he had done, he'd written to Stan's house, that he'd owned in Nailsea, but in the meantime, he'd [Stan] gone to live with his daughter, so he didn't get his post very often. All of a sudden, I get this phone call out of the blue, and it was him. It was strange because he didn't drive, and I was going to a wedding, a Sikh wedding, as it happens, that Saturday, so I'd decided to go to Nailsea and take a pair of trousers that I bought because I knew I'd have to sit on the floor. Velvet trousers, and I needed to shorten them. I thought, "Well, I'll go down to Nailsea". And on the way back I was going to stop off at Wootton Bassett and stay with a cousin and shorten my trousers at the same time. [Laughter.] And I found my way to Nailsea, perfectly easily. I'd seen it many a time on the M5, where you had to come off, and it was always in brackets in those days, so I'd heard of it. But Stan was absolutely hopeless at directing anyone. He never knew his right from his left. He actually had a scar on this right thumb, and he used to rely on that, but then he couldn't remember whether it was his right thumb or his left thumb.

So, I found my way perfectly to Nailsea itself, but his directions were absolutely hopeless. I've passed the comprehensive school, yes, that was okay, then I went down this road and got to the end, and I thought, "I think I've come too far". So, I went down Hannah More Road, named after a famous lady who founded schools in Nailsea, and I thought, "I've got to ask the way". And there's a young man painting a house there, and I said, "Please can you help me? I'm looking for Morgans Hill Close". And he said, "Never heard of it". So, I said, "Well, I do know it's near a pub called the Ring 'o' Bells." "Oh, Ring 'o'

Bells! I know where that is". And Stan had already mentioned he was going to book a lunch at the Ring 'o' Bells, which is right opposite. So, I found my way eventually to the house, and it was really strange because we had been very, very close friends, and we more or less carried on the conversation we'd finished about forty or fifty odd years before, and it was really lovely.

He was living at his daughter's. He too had had a heart attack, I'm afraid, but he'd also burnt down his kitchen with a chip fryer, and he did it twice, and that was typical of him, actually.

I: Was he widowed or divorced?

R: By then he was widowed, and I've missed out on another important thing. I think it was about 1954, and I was quite keen on tennis, as a spectator. I was hopeless at any games, and I became really interested in Jaroslav Drobný, and I really wanted him to win. He did win the finals, eventually, but I only heard it on the radio. By this time, David was going to school, I think. Yes, he would be going to school after Wimbledon. I decided to go to a news cinema, and I thought I would introduce him to the cinema. There's always some cartoons, and I can see the tennis because not many people had televisions. So, we went somewhere off Oxford Street to a news cinema and, poor kid, he sat through all of that, and he was so good, so I treated him to a chocolate éclair, and he would hate me telling you this because he doesn't eat sweet things at all.

So I thought, "We'll go in Lyons Corner House". And I sat him in a chair, and he was always quite good and reliable with things like that, and I queued up at this cafeteria and I'd bought myself some tea, and I could only afford one chocolate éclair. Anyway, I looked at the cakes, and I looked up about to say, "Have you got any chocolate éclairs?" And it was Stan. He worked there on Saturdays [laughter] at Lyons Corner House, and he said, "I'm sure I can find one for you". And I often said to him afterwards, "I think you went and picked that one up off the floor because why wasn't it on sale?" And he said, "Course I didn't". And I said, "That's for my son". Now, this was very naughty of him. He didn't think I was telling the truth when I told him that my husband had died. I never quite forgave him for that, I mean, you know, he didn't believe me. I suppose when you see a young woman with a child, perhaps you automatically think, "Oh, no, that's a little bastard" or something, and he didn't really accept it. I mean, he did eventually. But we never arranged that. He said, "Can you wait 'til I've finished, and I'll see you after I've finished?"

So, we went for a walk around Hyde Park. We chatted, and he told me he had two little girls. He lived in Barnett, and he was only doing this for money to live. His wife never wanted to do any work because my sister would have worked on a Saturday and my brother would have stayed at home, but that didn't work with him. So, we just chatted, and we didn't make any arrangement at all, but I did have some connection by post while I lived in Saltash, but I never followed it through. But it was when I saw this stall, and I'd looked at all these other old men on Hiroshima Day, and one of them was him, and did nothing about it. But then of course I did, and so Stan used to come backwards and forwards and stay up in Southall, and I used to come down to Nailsea.

Of course, I'd already decided that I couldn't stay there forever and I thought, "I don't want to go as far as Plymouth again, and Bristol's not too bad down the M4". And I used to drive backwards and forwards a lot when I first came down here. I was a guide at the Natural History Museum, and I kept that up for some time as well, once a week. So I eventually decided I'd quite like to live in Nailsea so that's how I happened to come to Nailsea.

I: Did you live together?

R: No. He wanted to, but I saw him all the time, nearly every day, and we did go away on holidays once or twice. Actually, I mean, I had my own home, so I bought my own home, and it was only a one-bedroom house, but a nice modern one in Nailsea, and a little garden, but I'm afraid this is what happens with daughters. He had two daughters, one was fine, I still see her occasionally, but the one who still lives in Nailsea wasn't very nice. She really thought I was going to make him come and live with me, and I actually said, "Where do you think his belongings would fit in?" It was a small house, and I wasn't getting rid of any of mine. He had quite a nice room in her house, and she wasn't very nice at all, actually, but I still went on seeing him, and she didn't stop me, and I was with him when he died, actually. He was in the BRI [Bristol Royal Infirmary] in Bristol several times.

I: When was that?

R: That was from 2000 onwards he was in hospital. I came down to Nailsea in 1994, and I always say: my son got married, there was democracy in South Africa, and I met up with Stan. 1994. But I didn't move down until 1997. I didn't rush down here, and so I came down here to live and, again, she [Stan's daughter] was so nasty that I'm afraid he moved out and got sheltered accommodation in Nailsea. But I used to see him all the time, and she never saw his flat until after he'd been there for about three years, which I thought was really bad because he needed help. He did get help, and I helped him as much as I could, and he went in hospital, and she never knew this. I never told her this because it was only me and his other daughter whom he told. He wanted us to say, if he had another bad heart attack, he didn't want to be resuscitated, which was really right because he'd really had enough, although he was younger than I am now.

So, I knew that this was likely to happen, and he actually had been in hospital, and he'd only been home about two days and the warden – there was a warden where he lived – she had suddenly become aware he was supposed to be back. She wasn't calling on him as a regular thing, so she checked whether he was back or not, and she went in his flat and found him on the floor, and she got the ambulance and rang me. I think I'd already rung just to check up every day, and I'd already rung, and she said, "Well, the ambulance is outside, you might be able to get 'round in time". And I did, and I went off to the hospital with him, and he was put in a heart resuscitation room. There was about four of them in this little ward and, obviously, I don't think any of them were going to get better.

But they were lovely there and, as it happens, the daughter that lives in Burnham now, Burnham-on-Sea, she was coming down to see him, and she happened to be on the coach, and nobody had informed her. Now her sister hadn't informed her that their dad was in hospital, so she was going to let Di come all the way to Nailsea to be told to get back to Bristol. I managed to get in touch with her on her mobile. She wasn't answering it at first, before she got to Bristol, so that she could come straight to the hospital. I left them to it that day and then the next day, which was the Saturday, I was going because there were various things he'd asked for me to collect the day before, which I went to do in his flat. And it was pretty obvious that he wasn't going to survive.

So, we did talk, all of us, for a while, and the two of them actually did go off and have a little chat together, and I told the staff nurse about my 21st birthday, when I was nursing in Epsom and he was working at a Peace Unit in the East End of London and he cycled all the way down with one red rose for my 21st birthday and then cycled all the way back again. Mind you, I said it was a yellow rose, and it cost him a shilling. So, I told the staff nurse and the staff nurse was a male staff nurse, and he was absolutely lovely. He was

so kind. He was kind to all of them because there were ... Clare's son happened to have about ten children by then, and he had fathered a child while he was still at school and then went on, but it was the same person, went on producing children until he had about ten. So, some of those were there, and one of Di's children was there and they were okay.

And I was allowed to say something at his funeral, and he was pretty well known from union stuff, and he wanted to be cremated, but he wanted a humanist ceremony. He didn't want a religious ceremony, but that was all done very nicely, and it was packed. And I did a bit of Shakespeare, "Fear no more the heat of the sun", and it was all about golden boys and girls because we were all very young. He was quite a few years older than me, but he wasn't so mature for his age, so really, we were quite close together when we were young, during the war, and you couldn't do anything except walk around London when the bombs weren't falling.

I: Did you meet him before you met your husband?

R: No, I knew my husband by sight at Harrods first, but then, in the meantime, I didn't keep up with anyone at Harrods because I wasn't there that long, and then I went in the Civil Service, but I was never evacuated. I remember now how I met Stan, how I first met him. Actually, I was still in the Civil Service and my dad said, "There's a First Aid course being run in Westbourne Park Road, in the church there, so I think I'll go along. Do you want to come too?" And I said, "Yes, of course, I'll come with you". And he said, "It's at a Peace Unit". And he must have found out about it through the Peace Pledge Union, and we went along and we did a bit of first aid training, and then I stayed on as a part-time volunteer. I used to go there two or three evenings a week, and they were, of course, all young men, and they were varied, some went off, and they were all quite a mixed group. Some Quakers, who would be automatically ...

I: Conscientious?

R: They didn't have to go before any tribunal, and there were various other people. Stan had had to go before a tribunal even though his dad was a miller, and he could have got reserved occupation, but he didn't want to do that.

Actually, my son asks me to write memoirs every now and again. So, fairly recently he said, "Write me a memoir about your first boyfriend". Well, this happened to be one of the other young men there, Alan, who I wrote about. That didn't last, and I won't go into the Alan thing because it's quite different, but I did keep in touch with Stan because one day I was at the hospital, and I had a free time and I thought I'd walk to Kensington Gardens. To my great surprise, Stan was suddenly walking along beside me because I'd known him at the unit, and I then used to visit the unit quite a bit to see him and we kept in touch and that was how, when I went down to Epsom, he came down with the rose.

I: So, it's all because of Stan that you ended up living here?

R: Yes, really, and I see Di occasionally, but I can't drive to Burnham-on-Sea anymore, and it's difficult for her to get here. We keep in touch, and she's very much a campaigner all the time, and I get all these messages, but it's usually something that I've already put my signature to anyway.

I: Just to bring it to some kind of conclusion ... Can you just fill me in a bit on what you said about your War Widows' Pension?

R: I have to say that I've got Ménière's disease. I don't know whether you've heard of it? It's to do with the balance of the ear, and that's what caused my deafness, and I had tinnitus very badly, and I found what actually helped was having the radio on. Not music, but the spoken voice because you could listen above this noise. I don't have it anymore, it went, but I'm always afraid that it might come back. I don't think it will now. So the radio really helped me. I would have Radio 4 on, listening to the spoken word, even when I was driving, even if I'd already heard it, I would have the radio on. I used to listen to this Saturday morning programme called "You and Yours". Does it still happen? Because I hardly ever listen to the radio now because of my ears.

They were talking about unclaimed benefits. I think they were more general benefits as well as this one, but I was listening to all of this and, as it happened, because David was in full-time education by the time he was 21. It might have been eighteen. I was over forty, so I was still entitled to a widow's state pension, so that wasn't so bad. By this time, I was getting widow's pension, but I was listening to all of this, and they were talking about all these benefits that people don't claim, but I don't think many people miss out on claiming nowadays, and they started talking about people who died and had served in the Services but died after the war. How they had probably been entitled to a pension, but because they'd already left the Services, but their illness was somehow exacerbated by their war service, so that they should have claimed.

Now, with Johnny, the little boy, who was at school with David, his dad had been discharged from the Navy, so I think his mum automatically got a War Widows' Pension and I thought, "That really applies to me". And I listened to this, and I thought, "I'm going to look into this". And I think I must have rung the British Legion. I can't quite remember the sequence. I know I rang, and I was told that somebody called Gwen would call and see me. She wasn't allowed to tell me her surname or address or anything. I did have a phone by this time, and she said that she would look into things. So I gave her all my details and weeks and weeks went on, and I thought, "I'm not going to hear any more about this. I think I'll just leave it". And then, I thought, "No, I will just get in touch". Because I did give her all the information, and she was quite convinced I was entitled to it, and I finally got in touch with her, and she got back, and I was given a form to fill in and everything.

Well, I got a lot of incorrect information back. I mean, they had things like my husband had served in Persia, as Iran was called then. Well, I didn't think that they were involved in the war at all, and they never ever explained that one. Then they had one other horrible thing: that all they had on his notes was that he was short-sighted, and that he'd mentioned that he'd had rheumatic heart fever, and that he hadn't mentioned his mitral valve. I don't know if he'd mentioned it when he was medically examined, but I think, in a way, he was quite pleased to go in the Army because he was fed up of being attacked as a Jew, apparently, for not being in the Army. He had no objection. He wasn't a conscientious objector or anything. He was a peace lover, but he did not take his peace-loving that far. Then they had terrible things on his record that were definitely not true. First of all, they said he'd only had a general education. Well, he'd actually gone to the City of London College as a young teenager, and I think his parents paid. He had very high grades for matriculation. He was a fluent Spanish speaker, and there weren't many fluent Spanish speakers in those days. You could say had a general education. But, also, the most horrifying thing, okay, if this was true, I'm not saying that it was horrifying that it happened to this person ... It had on his record that he said, and who would ever tell this anyway, that he had told them that one of his aunts was certified as insane.

I'd never heard of this and, of course, I was never able to bring it up with my father-in-law because by the time I was doing this claiming, he had died. But, I mean, you wouldn't go to a medical exam ... You'd only be asked about medical things. You wouldn't say

that. He had told them, which was true, that a cousin had died of Tuberculosis, but that's different, but you wouldn't say, "Oh, by the way, one of my aunts was mad". And I mean, the term "insane" was actually used in those days, and they never explained that. They never explained the bit about Persia at all.

I: But, actually, you managed to cope with all the bureaucracy?

R: Well, I had to do a lot, and I found my papers last night. The whole story is by this time I just wouldn't give up, and I got this letter to say that I'd been turned down, and I said, "Well, I would like some answers". First of all, as far as I was concerned, he was a very intelligent man, and why was he put in the Pioneer Corps? They'd passed him as A1 and, of course, by this time a doctor had told me that he'd never pass him for a life insurance. I never got those things explained to me and, especially, the Persia business. I mean, it's all on his records that he was sent to India and then on to Burma. I've got it all on the records, so, I've got that.

So, it took me a long time because I was rejected to start with, and then I applied again and the British Legion were very, very helpful to me. There was a man there waiting to see me when I went to the second tribunal, and he said, "Don't worry if they're a long time. It doesn't mean to say that they're going to turn you down". And they really were hard questioning me, and I think the fact that I'd been a nurse really did help me because they had asked me, "How did I know that he had a chronic disease?" Well, I mentioned – I don't know whether you know about it – clubbing of the fingers, when, actually, the finger nails get kind of round, and I'd mentioned that that would be unusual for an ordinary person who'd never done nursing to know that. But they were pretty hard on me, and I couldn't believe it when I finally went back because they kept me waiting an awfully long time. They were late starting with me because the person before me was late, so then they decided to have their lunch.

So, I had to wait about two hours, and he kept saying – and I don't remember his name, the man from the Legion, but he was very nice – and he kept saying, "This could be a good sign, you know. It means they haven't rejected us". And I said, "But yes, they're eating their lunch". So, they called me back in, and they said, "Yes, we have decided that, yes, his illness must have been exacerbated".

I: Did you get any other help from any other organisations?

R: No. Well, they said, "We can't give you forty years' back pay". I'd have been a millionaire, wouldn't I? [Laughter.] But they did give me two years, which was something. I mean, okay, I'm alright here because I get War Widows' Pension, and it's quite good, and I have absolutely no complaints. I think it's even going up a bit this year. So, I have absolutely no complaints, and I know people here get benefits, and I say, "Well, I get a benefit but my benefit is very good, and it's not subject to any earnings. It's tax free". And people here look at me as much as to say, "We don't get enough to pay tax anyway". And, of course, I have a teacher's pension, which I paid for, and also this little extra one from Ealing, which also goes up and the increases are now more than it was to start with because it's on my contributions alone. For three years, we paid a scheme called Graduated Pension, so this small State Pension I get – I don't get the full State Pension as well – it's based on the three years I've paid and apparently some extra. It might even be what I paid during the war, something like that. So, I've no complaints and I don't say, "I'm a poor war widow."

I: But just to round it off really, could you say just a little tiny bit about how people treated you as a single mum and widow?

R: I have to say I was treated quite unkindly.

I: **Really?**

R: People have funny ideas. Either they wouldn't want to speak to me when I was a young mum, and this would be people in the area who had known my husband, and they would kind of avoid speaking to me. Then some nice people would want to see my baby, but mostly looked at the dog [laughter], but they did take notice of him when he was older. It did vary, and I remember going into the local greengrocers in Heston, and the woman boss said, "I'm sad to hear about your husband". But she said, "But you're lucky, you've got your son, and you can always get another husband, but can you replace your son?" And I said, "But I don't want to replace my husband, and I certainly don't want to replace my son, anyway". You know, funny things that they say. You see, all my life I'd had people say, "Why didn't you get married again?" I usually say, "Nobody's ever asked me".

You get to the stage, anyway, when you're so independent living alone that you wouldn't want to live with anyone. Who would want to live with me? I've got cupboards full of junk, I do my washing up just when it suits me, and there are other women just like me as well who are younger than I am, and they say, "I wouldn't get married again". And if we ever get a man here, and there's a new man here ... I really don't think he's after the women, I think, because there are so few men and only two, I think, on their own, that he has to assert himself, and so now they think that he's trying to chat them up but I don't think he is. But they said, "Well he didn't come after me, and I wouldn't want to get married again, anyway".

And I don't think he's after getting married again. He's probably enjoying his independence because he's fairly active and he gets involved in various things. He saves all his small coins. and I've some money in my bag now to give to Eva. He puts all his small coins in a bag, all his pennies and five pence coins, puts them in a bag, and he gives them as a donation to the tea bar, which I think is lovely, and it's not something everyone does. Some people might give a packet of biscuits occasionally, but he gives them money as soon as he's got a bag of small coins. But they're a bit anti him because they think he's after the women because apparently ... and he might just have been making a joke.

There is one lady here who's a very independent lady. She doesn't have anything to do with raffles or donations. She's still fairly active and she obviously must have made clear to him when he started being friendly and, apparently, he said, "So, you're not a good time girl then?" And then I'm afraid that she told various people this, and they now say, "I don't want him asking me if I'm a good time girl". [Laughter.] And one woman has even said, "If he tried to sit at our table I'd tell him he's not allowed there". Which wouldn't happen.

Have I gone on too long? I keep suddenly remembering things.

I: **No, I feel really privileged to have met you.**

R: I think by this time we must have covered everything. And before, I was telling you about the greengrocer saying, "Oh, you can always find another husband". My own family weren't particularly nice to me when I was asserting myself. My dad wasn't so bad. My dad would come and take David out, and that was okay and on a Sunday. I suppose he thought it was nice for me to have the Sunday to myself because I've got to work again tomorrow, and they looked after him when I had to work. I only had to do one evening a week anyway, and it was quite nice being attached to a hospital because you all work

on Christmas Day, or you did in those days, the whole day, when I was doing my training and everything. So, on Christmas Day I didn't actually work, but I used to take my son in, and it was really lovely because the patients who were still there for Christmas. They were all nice to David, and he used to come away with a handful of money as well, so he liked it. But they loved to meet him, and it's nice for patients to know that when you're not here you're a human being, not a nurse.

I: I think your son's right. You've got so many stories that I think it would be a good idea to write some of them down.

R: Well, we do now, which is a good thing, as well. A woman here happens to have written a number of books, and she's a local woman, and she started off a Memories Club and so we do them for her. I haven't given her every one of mine because one or two of mine are a bit sad because as a child, my best friend was murdered and this was an awful thing. I did write about it because I would never give that to anybody else, so, I gave it to David because I feel I would like to record this, and it was pretty awful because we had started school together, and we lived in the same house, not when it happened but that's just one memory I'm not giving to any other person. But, yes, I'm due now to write my first Fairy Cycle and Mary keeps saying, "When am I going to get my first Fairy Cycle?" Well, she's got my first boyfriend, I've given her another one, I've given her two. Oh, the day the war ended, I was on duty.

I: That's probably a good place to end.

R: Yes, she's got that one as well. So, that's going quite well. It's sort of fizzled out and there's only a few people still interested which is a bit sad. Some people have done one story and that's their lot, they don't want to go to her meetings any more but I go to her meetings and I have typed out one or two memories for people so things like that happen here.

I: I'd just like to say thank you very much.



Fig. 5: Joan Eggmore with a photograph of her husband, Dougie Eggmore. 12 May 2017.



Fig. 6: Joan's husband, Dougie Eggmore.



War Widows' Stories

History. Memories. Heritage.

An Interview with Sylvia Elliott

10 May 2017

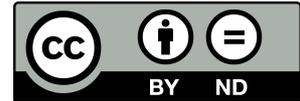
Conducted by Mrs Glenda Spacey



The War Widows'
Association
of Great Britain



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To do so, and for any other questions about this interview, how you may use it, or about the project, please contact Dr Nadine Muller via email (info@warwidowsstories.org.uk), or by post at the following addressing: John Foster Building, Liverpool John Moores University, 80-98 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, L3 5UZ.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

I = Interviewer

PR = Project Representative

R = Respondent / Interviewee

[] = Clarification note

I: Can you tell me your name please and how old you are?

R: Sylvia, Sylvia Elliott. Now, I was Sylvia Betesta when I was a child. I'm 84 now, and I was born in Derby of a very big family. There was nine of us, and we used to fight like anything. I don't remember an awful lot about when I was small, but when I was six, when war broke out, we were all put on buses, all lined up and put on buses with a label on us and sent off. I went to a little place called Stanley Common, just outside Derby, but as a child of six I thought that I'd gone hundreds of miles away and I thought my parents had given me away because nobody told us anything.

We had to sit in a school room and they came and picked out who they wanted, and I went to a nice couple and they were very nice. As I lived in a town I didn't know lots of things and this gentleman where I went to live had got a greenhouse with tomatoes in it and he let me pick one and I'd never picked a tomato in my life. Those little things ... We went skating, well without skates, on the pond that was there. Then he was taken ill and I know, from afterwards, that he had to go in hospital, so I was sent somewhere else and my mind is blank from there. I didn't remember anything.

I don't know what happened, something must have done, but anyway the next I remember is being back home and the war was on, and my grandma used to sit ... when the sirens went ... she used to take me and we'd sit on the cellar steps and she made a cup of cocoa. One night, my sister – my oldest sister was in the WAAFs [Women's Auxiliary Air Force] – she was home on leave and she said, "I'm not getting up again for the sirens". So, anyway, the sirens went and as in all the houses where I lived, there's a tin bath at the bottom, hanging on the wall, and a bomb dropped four doors away from us. The bath fell off the wall, and my sister fell out of bed and fell all the way down on the stairs. I remember all that, but I don't remember much more until ... I must have been a bit older and my father had been in the Army, but he was at Nottingham Castle guarding all the ammunition in the dungeons at Nottingham Castle, and he and his friend were supposed to guard it.

Then, the next I remember is him being at home again, and I must have been a bit older, quite a bit older, and he fetched me out of the house one night. Oh, he was a fire watcher then, ARP [Air Raid Precaution] man, and he fetched me out and he said, "Come and look". There was a storm on and we watched, and he said, "Look up in the

sky". And there was this tiny red light and he said, "Keep watching". And then it burst into flames. It was the barrage balloons and the lightning was striking them and it was just like fireworks up in the sky. They couldn't get them in quick enough, you see, to save the balloons. They had one balloon, it was called Big Bertha, on the arboretum, right near where we lived. And where we lived, we were right at the top of the street and exactly across the road was Derby Crown China Works. We found out afterwards that that's what the Germans were trying to bomb, as well as Rolls Royce and the Midlands Station where the trains were being built.

Later on, when they were coming off duty at Rolls Royce ... the shifts used to change, they used to pass in the road, the night shifts and the day shifts, they used to pass each other as they were changing shifts ... and two German aircraft came in and machine gunned them and there were hundreds of them dead. From there on, they changed the way they did the shifts, so there weren't two lots. One of the German planes was shot down, and inside it they found a holiday brochure, and it had this map, and it had Rolls Royce ringed in red, Derby Crown China Works [The Royal Crown Derby Porcelain Company] in red, and the Midlands Station in red. So that's what those two German planes had come over with, that's all they'd got to follow. If I'm saying Derby Crown China, that was how we knew it. It's really Derby ... oh, I can't remember the real name as it was then, but we called it that.

My brother worked there and we were only across the road from it, and they used to have a siren that used to go. This was after the war and the siren went to tell them they've got five minutes to get into work. This siren went, my brother jumped out of bed, ran down the stairs, cleaned his teeth, ran out across the road, and his foreman had a cup of tea waiting for him.

As I got older, I used to love to go to church, and I loved Brownies, and then I was in Guides, and I was in a carnival band as a pace stick girl at the front. Best in the Midlands we were at one time. We used to go into competitions and all things like that. Then we used to go to a dance and this was when I was seventeen / eighteen-ish, at two dance halls, The Ritz and The Rialto, and they used to let [Armed] Forces go in free, so, of course, we girls used to go to the dance because there were lots of Forces. One day, I went and I saw this soldier sitting there, and he never danced, and I went and sat talking to him. I said, "Why aren't you dancing?" And he said, "Oh, I can't". He said, "I'm convalescing, I've been in Korea". And he was back in Normanton Barracks, which was where the [Sherwood Foresters](#) were, and that's how I met my husband.

He was in the Sherwood Foresters, and then he was sent to Germany in the Sherwood Foresters. He was on duty at the Nuremberg Trials. They could only do one day at a time and then they sent them on ... R&A I think they call it ... something like that He was telling me all about that, and he said he'd been wounded in Korea. They'd gone into a trap and the whole platoon was wiped out. Oh, I'm taking you too far, that was what my husband was telling me. Husband-to-be was telling me. He was found in the jungle after two days. There was only him and his friend who survived. His friend had both legs blown off, and my husband-to-be had his legs badly smashed up. They were brought out of the jungle on stretchers, hanging under helicopters.

He was taken to the MASH, the American MASH, and he said it was exactly the same as on the TV. He was in there, and they said the Americans saved his legs, but if he'd have been taken to the British one, they'd have amputated. They were that bad. While he was in the MASH station, he said the operating tables were just like it is on the TV, everything was exactly the same. And he said this officer came round when they were all in their beds, a high-up officer, and he got a purple cushion and he was giving them

all the Purple Hearts, the Americans, and he gave my husband-to-be one and he said, "I don't want that. I'm British". And he gave it him back.

So, now I'll tell you about what he told us about when he went to Korea. He was in Germany with the Sherwood Foresters, and he was seconded into the Northumberland Fusiliers and sent to Korea. At the time, my husband was only seventeen, I think, and they were the first ones to arrive in where the fighting was, and the Americans. They had to wade through the Imjin River, and then they went into the jungle and my husband said it was awful, it was horrific. He said the Koreans, the North Koreans, never left bodies intact, and he said you only knew whether it was British or American that you were crawling over by the colour of the uniforms. He wouldn't ever tell me much about Korea, he said it was too horrific, and none of the men that went to Korea at the same time as my husband ... They joined the Korean Veterans, and they used to sit talking, and they talked together, but they wouldn't ever let me listen.

Then, after they moved him from the MASH hospital ... I'm not sure, I think he was taken to a hospital in Hong Kong and he was there for a long, long time. Not quite sure how long. When he finally came back to England, him and his friend were on a bed on the decks of a cruise ship, a very posh cruise ship, he said, and they all spoiled him silly, all the people on the ship. He was 21 when he was coming back on this ship, and the nurses, I'm not sure whether it was the nurse or the staff, made him or gave him a little sailor with the name of the ship on.²⁰ Then he came back and he was sent back to Normanton Barracks to recuperate, but his mother didn't know he'd been wounded. They'd [his family] gone to the cinema and they'd seen these helicopters coming out of the jungle with the stretchers hanging below, and she said that she didn't know that one of them was her son. She had to get in touch with one of the ministers and they got in touch with London to find out what had happened, and then she was told that he'd been wounded in action. Then I met him whilst he was at Normanton Barracks.

I: Is that in Derby?

R: In Derby. And then he started taking me home to his house, and he lived at B-Winning, between Alfreton and Chesterfield. I was one of a family of nine children, and in the war we had hardly anything, living in a town. When my husband to be took me to his mother's, they had everything, living in the country. They treated me like a princess. It was lovely. I think I fell in love with the family as well as my husband-to-be.

He was demobbed. He was still in the Army but he couldn't stay in because he'd been wounded but, at the time, he didn't know that if he'd have been disabled out of the Army, he would have had a green card and he would have never been out of work. But some kind person told him that if he took it, he would never get a job. There was no counselling in those days and he came out, he had no job, no career because he'd gone in the Army to make it a career, and he had to do labouring jobs as time went by. He had to travel the country, so he was never with me. Well he was sometimes. I had two girls, Carol and Dawn and we had to live from hand to mouth on what we got.

Seventeen years after, we were at a Korean Veterans' meeting and the limbless man was there, and he said, "Oh, Bill, I bet you get full pension". And Bill said, "I don't get a pension". And he [the man] was very angry, and he got some forms out of his case, filled them in, sent them away, and by return post my husband got a full pension. When he asked about the back money, they said, "No, because that's your own fault for not asking".

²⁰

See Fig. 1.

I: How old were you when you married? Can you just tell me a little bit about you and your husband when you first got married?

R: I was twenty when I got married and my husband would be about, 23, I think. I didn't know anything. In those days, your parents never told you anything. So, of course, as soon as we married, I got caught for a baby. So, I had my first wedding anniversary in hospital and Carol was born two days after my first wedding anniversary. We had a very hard time up until then and then my husband, after a long time, he did manage to get a job at Rolls Royce in the Despatch Department. By then our girls were growing up and I was working at Rolls Royce as well, in the offices. But, he used to be the last one to touch an engine when it went to go on the plane, into a carrier plane, to go to America or wherever. I used to buy all the nuts and bolts to build the engines.

We were married for forty years and we had a fortieth anniversary party. My son-in-law was a fantastic master chef so he did us a big party. My husband, his life revolved around the British Legion and we had the party at the British Legion and we had this party on the Saturday night and on the Sunday was our Ruby Wedding day and we had an open day. We went to the Legion in the evening and walked home and he went to the toilet and he never came back, he had a massive heart attack and that was on the day of our Ruby Wedding.

I: All the time you were married, were you always living in Derby, or had you been together somewhere else?

R: No, always in Derby. For the last part, when my husband had retired, we lived on the War Memorial Village at Derby. The people of Derby had made a little village for the ex-servicemen that were wounded and our house was called "Anzio". They were all named after battles. Before our Ruby Wedding, of course, the Korean government got in touch and said that all those that were in Korea and wounded, they would go as a guest to Korea but my husband, the doctor wouldn't let him go. He said he wasn't well enough because he was having lots of pain with his legs and he was having mild heart attacks, so, he said he couldn't go.

So, after a while, one of the men from Nottingham said, "They've sent Bill's citation from Korea". And I've got it and the Lord Lieutenant of Derbyshire wants to present it to him. Well, Bill was very, held himself to himself, never showed his feelings, in fact, that was what caused any problems between us. I used to say to him, because he never showed his affection, and I used to say, "Haven't you got any feelings?" And he said, "I left them in Korea". And I knew he wouldn't go to a proper presentation. It was Colonel Hilton, the Lord Lieutenant of Derbyshire and he was the President of the Royal British Legion, as well, at the time.

So, they said, "Well he wants to present him properly". So, I said, "Well, the only place he can get him is the British Legion". So, we had a bit of a cloak and dagger between us with the Nottingham Korean Vets and Colonel Hilton and myself. I said we used to go every Saturday and Sunday evening and Wednesday and Colonel Hilton had rung me up a few times and he said, "Can we make it and I will come to the British Legion to present him in front of everybody?" So, I said, "Well, I'll try and get him one night when he's not on duty". Because they used to take it in turns, the committee, take it in turns to be on duty. We had a couple of games of bingo as normal and dancing and artists sometimes. So, they would announce it and look after everybody.

Anyway, this Sunday, I said, "He won't be on duty". So, when we were getting ready to go that was all arranged, and they were going to hide in the bar, all of them, including Colonel Hilton. We were getting ready and he said, "Oh, I think I'll put my old sports

coat on tonight". And I said, "Oh, no. I always get dressed up when I go out on a Sunday night, why can't you, just for once, please me". So he put his suit on. When we got there, he was like a jack in a box, and I kept saying, "Sit still. Sit still". And he said, "I'm sure I've seen one of my friends in the bar from Nottingham". And I said, "No, you haven't. Sit still". And I kept thinking, "Oh, please hurry up and start".

Anyway, then they started and Colonel Hilton came through the door and all the Nottingham veterans came behind him. I'm getting a bit full up now. They all walked up to the dance floor, and he sat there and he was dumbstruck. Colonel Hilton said a few words, and then his friend from Nottingham stood up and he said, "And now we're going to do a 'Bill Plowman: This is Your Life'". And they went all through Bill's life, and then they talked about Korea, what he'd done in Korea, and how he'd been wounded. I'm sorry, I'll have to stop a minute.

PR: It's okay, we can just take a break. I'll pause the recording for now.

I: So, we were talking about the presentation.

R: Yes, and you could tell what he was like and nobody knew. Although he had a very bad limp, nobody, only the Korean vets knew that he had been wounded. So, they did this 'This is Your Life' and one had made a book of his life, but I couldn't get hold of that because it's up at the top the cupboard. Afterwards, all the women in the Legion and they'd be about 150, came up round him crying and they were all saying, "We didn't know you'd been wounded, Bill". Nobody knew anything about it.

Then he got quite grumpy in his old age. He had to retire through ill health and when he retired. You can tell how everybody thought such a lot of him. When he left Rolls Royce, they had a party for him at our Legion and somebody else did a book about his life. Loads of people came from Rolls Royce to see him and then that was when he retired. As I say, he got rather grumpy and he didn't want me to work when he'd retired. He was one of the old type and he said, "A man is supposed to look after his wife and family". And he kept on and on at me to retire.

I: Were you still at Rolls Royce?

R: I was still at Rolls Royce and he kept on at me to retire. It was only two years before I would retire. So, in the end, he wore me down and I retired and I lost ever such a lot of money through that, but the thing was I retired two years before my birthday, when it was 60 then, and I retired at 58. We had that time together, and Bill died in the November as I would have officially retired the following April.

I: How old was he then?

R: He was 60. So, he'd be about 60, I think he was. And so if I hadn't had retired, I would have never forgiven myself. When it was his funeral, I said, well my daughters, especially my oldest daughter, they'd just gone back from the party because they were living here then. They'd stayed with us until the Sunday and they'd gone back Sunday tea-time, come back here. I had to ring her and tell her that her dad had died, and she wanted just our family funeral. Anyway, when it came to the funeral, it was unbelievable, there was all the standards, Korean Veterans' standards from round the country. There were about five British Legion standards, there was the Women's Section's standard and, I can't remember his name, who was Bill's Commanding Officer in Korea. Colonel Hennington Booth. I can put that right for you, in a little while, I've got it in some notes. And he was there and he spoke at the service.

And this church, it was a great big church at Derby, on our village, it was a great big one, and it was full to overflowing. All the directors that knew me and Bill at Rolls Royce came, and all my ... I dealt with a lot of companies, I had to go round to the companies ... and two or three from every one of the companies were at the funeral. So, he was a very loved man but the thing was, he dedicated his whole life, after he came out of the Army, to the Royal British Legion, and I think that's it..

I: Can I ask you: so how did you end up living here now? What happened after your husband died?

R: When he died in the November ... Oh, one thing I forgot, he'd only just, in the July, decided to have a car because they take the pension and he had a car, that was the July. I'd got a car because I was working before I retired but when I retired, I sold my car, so we'd just got the car Bill had got from ... the disabled car. This was July and he died in the November. The day after he died, they fetched his car back and I'd got no transport at all. Anyway, I said to my daughter ... I'll tell you a funny feeling I had. When we belonged to the Legion, everybody was our friends. Well, when Bill died, I felt that, and it was a very strange feeling, I hadn't got any friends, they only wanted to know me when Bill was alive. I had the feeling that the women thought I was going to go after their husbands. No way would I have done that, but that was the feeling I got, and there were only two or three that stuck by me. And friends that we'd gone away with, she was one of the worst. She sort of ignored me.

So, I'd always said that I'd love to come and live down here, and I said to Carol, one day, in passing ... She came a lot to see me. This is my eldest daughter, Carol. I said to her, "Will you look if there's any little bungalows to rent?" So, the following week, she said, "Oh, mum, I've been told of one but you've got to come quick and have a look". So, one friend that I had kept, that had stuck by me, I said to her, "Would you and your fella nip me over?" So, I came over, had a look, and I said, "Oh, it's lovely". And Carol said, "Well, you've got to tell him by next week". So, I said, "Alright, I'll have it". So, I went home and sorted everything out and everybody said, "You're going too quick. You're doing the wrong thing".

Well, my doctor, and in those days the doctor came to see you and, actually, I think he felt a bit guilty over Bill's dying like that. He told me he never expected him to have that heart attack. So, he came to see me, to check I was alright and how I was getting on. I told him [that I was moving away], and he said, "I think it's the best thing you can do, you go". So that's how I came. I just upped and came to Chapel St Leonards, and I joined everything. I joined the WI [Women's Institute]. Oh, at Derby, I didn't say, I was a Beaver Scout Leader, I'd been one for about twelve years in Derby and I loved it and when I got here, a lady came up to me, her name was Eileen Buxton, and she said, "We've been waiting for you, we want you to be the Beaver Scout Leader".

So, that was one thing. I joined the WI [Women's Institute] and I joined a couple of other clubs, but I didn't like them, so I dropped those off. So, that's how I was and I got into the village life because I was a Beaver Scout leader. So, I got in with the Church and I've never regretted one minute of coming to live here. The only thing is, I can't get to any of the War Widows meetings because Lincoln is my nearest one or Nottingham. Well, it's a long way and our bus service is terrible. So, I've been to Lincoln, I've been to the Christmas one, I've been to the pantomime with them. And they sent a car once, the funeral directors at Skegness said they would send one of their cars to take a war widow that couldn't get to the Forces Day Service. They sent it to me and they said, "Your sister can come. Have you got a sister or your daughter?" And I said my sister would like to come because her husband had been in the Forces. So, we were just like

the Queen waving her hands and they took us to Lincoln Cathedral and then he waited for us to come out and brought us home and that was lovely.

I've been to three or four conferences. My daughter came with me and a friend came with me to two in the past but my daughter, Carol, my oldest daughter came with me to the one at Wales and it was lovely, we enjoyed it.

I: So, since you've been here, you've got a nice support system and friends?

R: Well, I've got friends, yes, but most of my friends, close friends have died. They lived in this building and we used to have barbecues down on the patio and they used to come up here. We used to have a Race Night and because I've got the biggest place, one of them bought those, at home race meetings, and they're funny, very funny. We used to all bring some food and I'd set it out on the table and then we'd have this race meeting. We used to bet 50p a time and the winner took the money. There was about twelve of us and we used to have some lovely times but four have died and two have moved.

I: Can I ask you about the rest of your family? You said you came from a really big family.

R: Oh, yes, there were nine children. Five boys and four girls and I was the middle one. We lived in the middle of the town. My father was in the Forces and he got duodenal ulcers, so, he was invalided out, but they didn't get anything then.

I: Are your family around here now?

R: No, no. Someone said once, big families either keep close or hate each other. I'm afraid we all hated each other. It was a case of fight for everything you had, but we've got closer as we've got older. I've got a brother in Australia. I've got a brother in Canada. I've been to Canada four times. My sister lives in Derby. My sister-in-law lives in Derby. My youngest brother died of cancer. His family live in Derby. My brother that was in the Paratrooper Regiment, he's died. His family live in Derby. So, most of my family live in Derby, and it's such an effort to go to Derby. I have to catch a bus into Skegness, and then the train to Nottingham, and then I get off that and get on another train to Derby. I have travelled in the past. In fact, I've been round the world on my own.

I: Is that since your husband died?

R: Yes. Since my second husband died. I'd saved the money to have carpet all fitted through here, and had two carpet fitters who said they couldn't do it because you can't put carpet on laminated floor. So, I said, "Oh, well you're turning down a lot of money". They both turned me down, so I thought, "Oh, I'm going to have a good holiday". So, I went to see a travel agent and said, "I want to go round the world on my own, flying". I went on nine flights, and I went all round the world. On the way, I stopped off in Australia to see my step-daughter's family, stopped there for three weeks. They live in Australia and I stayed there for three weeks. They live in Adelaide, and then on the way home I called at Canada to see my brother for two weeks. I had an absolutely fantastic time.

I spent every halfpenny, but it was lovely. I stayed at really lovely hotels. I'll tell you about one, shall I? I think, yes, it was Hong Kong. I arrived and the manager met me at the door, so I must have paid a lot for my room. The boys took my luggage up, and the manager took me up to my room. Well, it was like a suite, and it had a granny bed, a grandma bed, a great big one with drapes on. You had to go up steps to climb in it. He showed me how to work the TV and everything, and then he said, "And now". There was a great big wall like that, and he opened these curtains and it was all glass, and I

was overlooking the bay of Hong Kong, and I could see the cruise ships coming underneath. I thought, "Oh, this is nice". And he asked would I like breakfast in my room or would I like it in the dining room? And I said, "Oh, I'll have it in my room".

So, I sat in my nightie at the table overlooking the bay, watching the cruise ships go past and waved to them. There was me in my nightie; mind you, it was a posh nightie. But it was lovely, oh, it was lovely. I held a koala bear. I'm terrified of heights, but in each place I went, I had booked trips to see as much as I could. In Australia, when I first got there, I went to the Blue Mountains, and you have to go in three cable cars. As I say, I'm terrified of heights. The first one went straight across, and I stood in the middle hanging on to the bar, and I looked down and it was glass, and you couldn't see the bottom. Then the second one went vertical, on a slant down to the bottom, so I went on that. But to come back up, it was dead straight, and it was in a carriage like on a big dipper, that's all it was, with a bar across you, and you went straight up and it was a long way. Anyway, I did that.

Oh, I did all sorts. When we'd been on this trip to the Blue Mountains, we went in a minibus but it's on massive wheels, so you're high up and we'd gone all round in this one and we stopped at the edge of a park and then it was like open scrubland and we got out. There was only about twelve of us in this, that's all it held, and as we stood there, there were kangaroos coming out to look at us, and they were wild ones. Then he got this little table out, put it down, and then he got bottles of champagne out, and we drank champagne at the Blue Mountains looking at all the kangaroos. Oh, it was lovely.

I rode on the tram cars in San Francisco like Judy Garland did in *Meet Me in St Louis*, up and down on the outside. I sat on the outside. I flew from Sydney to San Francisco, and when I arrived in San Francisco, I hadn't left in Sydney, which I still can't understand.

I: Timelines.

R: When I got there, they'd lost my luggage, so, they took me to the hotel, and I had a car to take me all the time. I got to the hotel, and the boys ran out for my luggage, and I said, "I haven't got any. They've lost it". Anyway, they went back, told the manager, and he said, "Don't worry, we'll look after you". And he took me to the desk and checked me in, and he said, "We've got everything you need, so you needn't worry about anything". Anyway, I got my hand luggage and I always carry a change of clothes in my hand luggage. When they told me at the airport that they'd lost my luggage. Well, they said, "It's not on the plane. So, here's \$200. Go and buy some more clothes". So, I was fine with that.

So, anyway, I said to the commissaire in the hotel, "Where's the best place for me to get some clothes because I've only got what I'm standing up in?" And he said, "Hold on a minute". And he disappeared, and he came back and he'd got two vouchers. He said one was for Macey's and one was for the other big posh shop, I can never remember that name, and he said, "Go there, and even if it's in the sale, you'll still get a 20% off". So, anyway, off I go to Macey's, and I bought top clothes and some more underwear, and I was telling the girls, and all the girls came round me in the shop, and she said, "I'll give you a free gift then". And she gave me a beautiful Macey's bag, all wrapped up. So, I brought that back and gave it my daughter for a present. [Laughter]

I: Do you mind if I take you back to after your first husband died?

R: Yes.

I: And then you said that you re-married again afterwards. Do you want to tell us a little bit about that?

R: When I came here ... let me think how it started. I lived in a little bungalow at the top of the village and, of course, as I've said, I was a Beaver Scout Leader. One day, my sister-in-law (it's a bit roundabout – that's to show you how I knew) who lives in Wales, she said, "Our Bill should go and visit his cousin who lives in Chapel". So, she told us where they lived and Bill went to see them. The woman was his cousin and her name was Vera, and she was married to John. Anyway, then afterwards, Bill said to me, "Will you come with me to see her again?" So, we went again, and John had only just moved in the house, the bungalow, and John said to me, "If you need anything, I'll come and do it for you because I can do anything". So, I asked him to come and put my washing machine in, which he did, and he did lots of things to help me settle in.

Well, John had lived in South Africa for lots of years. He was an engineer and he helped build the roads to the diamond and gold mines. Vera was with him, she went with him there. I think she must have caught something, and when they came back to England she was ill. One day he rang me and he said, "I'm going to see Vera, will you come with me?" He said she's pretty ill and she was in hospital and I said, "Oh, I can't, John. I've got a meeting that I've got to go to. I'll come with you tomorrow". So, in the evening, I rang him and I said, "I'll come with you tomorrow". He said, "Oh, she's died".

Well, then, he knew my youngest daughter. Dawn and I often used to do the things for dos because we had catering in our blood because of my son-in-law, and he said, "Do you know where we could have the funeral, the meal?" And I said, "Well, if you like, Dawn and I will do it for you, make you a buffet at home". Which we did and then, after the funeral, he took us for a meal. And then one day he rang me and said, "Would you like to come for a ride in my car?" You know, a ride out in the country. And that was how it started.

The thing was, I told you about Bill having no feelings ... John was the opposite and he treated me like I was a beautiful princess. It was so different. Because, going back to my family, as a child I never had any love at all. I can't ever remember my mother or father even putting their arm around my shoulder. So, of course, when John came along, who was full of love ... I fell hook, line, and sinker, but he was the same. He said, he'd had an unhappy marriage, similar. Mine wasn't unhappy, but it wasn't romantic. No romance in my life. But I did love Bill in a different way. There's different ways. But that's how I got in with John, and I had ten years with John. He's the one that took me to Australia first, took me to meet his family, and we stopped off at Singapore.

I: And now, what do you do now? Do you get out and about? I know it's difficult.

R: Well, I haven't been out properly for quite a few weeks. It's seven weeks since I had my operation, and I didn't know I'd got cancer. The doctor was ignoring me, kept saying to leave things another month and that. I got an appointment with a Nursing Practitioner, and she sent me on a fast-track, and it really was fast, and within days they sent me for a special examination. It was with cameras. Then, on the same day, I had swabs and all those done, and they hinted then it might be cancer and said to bring my daughters with me when I come. They were with me that day, and Carol wouldn't accept it. She kept saying, "No it's not, mum. They haven't said it is". And I said, "They have".

Anyway, when we went the next time, we had to go back and see the consultant. He never said, "Can I?" He said, "I'm going to operate". And he said, "It is cancer. A cancerous tumour". And he said, "If when you come round you've got a stoma on your right side, that means I can put it back. That's the small intestine ... bowel ... and we

can join that. But if you've got one on your left side, I'm afraid we can't put that back". But because he knew he couldn't put it back, he could take ... and he told me this, he explained everything, and he said, "I've taken a lot from either side of the tumour". So, when the results came back ... I've got no cancer now, but I have got to have the stoma bag for always. But that happened very quick. I never dreamed it would happen to me.

I: But you're well again, now? Getting well again at the moment?

R: Oh, yes. When I came 'round after my operation, I was feeling great and everybody made me feel great. I had dozens and dozens of get well cards and flowers. It was like a florist in here. And everybody was ringing me up. When they saw me, they said, "You look fabulous! You don't look like we expected you to!" I don't know what they expected, but I do jump back very quick and that's why it's knocked me for six this has [the current illness]. The nurse told me the other day that it was touch and go over this; it was only just in time It was neglect because of the doctor, my doctor.

They said on my discharge notes that they were passing my care into their care, and nobody came to me. I had got a bit of an infection when I came out, but it just got worse and worse, and by the time I rang the doctors they said, "We have nothing to do with the district nurses". They gave me another number and I rang and by then I was nearly screaming at her, and I'm afraid I was a bit naughty and said some things. In the beginning she said they hadn't got room to push me in, and then I said all these naughty things and she said, "We'll come and get somebody tomorrow".

It was four o'clock the next afternoon before they came and the nurse walked in, she put her bag down there, her coat on there, took one look at me, lifted the ... I'd only got a gauze on me because I said to the nurse, "I've got no dressing". And she said, this woman that I spoke to on the phone, she said, "Put a towel over it". And she said, she walked across, she lifted it up, she said, "I won't be a minute, I'm going to my car". And she said to my daughter, "Pack a bag, she's off to hospital". And that was it, and she asked for a blue-light ambulance which means 'very urgent', and it was four hours before the ambulance came. My daughter had to ring and they said, "Oh, we're sorry". It was twenty past four when she rang the ambulance, and it was nine o'clock when they were checking me into the hospital. Nine o'clock at night.

I: That was very good. I think we're going to look at these –

PR: I wonder whether you could give us just a bit of an idea about the timelines? So the year, maybe, when you met your husband, and the year that you were married, and the year that he died. Would you be able to explain that to us?

R: Well, I met him when I was about eighteen, and we married when I was twenty.

PR: What years were those?

R: That was 1952 we married, and Bill died in 1992, dead on the forty years to the day. I came to live here in 1993, and I met my second husband about five years after that, and we married a year after I met him. Then we were married ten years ... I say ten years, but it was just under ten years when he died.

PR: Thank you.

R: And I've got two daughters. Carol is 64. She was born in 1953. And Dawn was 60 last week. That's my baby. 60.

I: Have you got grandchildren?

R: I've got two grandchildren. As you came in, there's the pictures of them both graduated. They both did well. My granddaughter is a school teacher. She was a Deputy Head at Immingham, but she's just moved to a higher position at a school in Skegness. My grandson, he's ... I don't know, he hasn't got a title, but he works for Blue Anchor, the big people who own all the caravans and the sites round here. And I've got one great-grandson, Marley, and he'll be six next month, going on 60. And that's all the grandchildren I shall have. My youngest daughter she's disabled. She's got lots of illnesses ... had them all her life. So she can't work or anything, and my life was really wrapped around looking after her, and one thing and another with her.

PR: Have you got energy for one more question –

R: Yes.

PR: – before we move on to the mementos you've got from before your husband passed away? You already mentioned that there were some issues that you had with your friends who weren't particularly welcoming. I wondered what kind of support, if any–

R: None.

PR: ... you had from government?

R: None.

PR: Council?

R: None.

PR: War Widows' Pension?

R: Oh, well, I'll tell you about that. They said I couldn't have a War Widows' Pension because on his death certificate it said he'd had a heart attack. But he'd been going to hospital all those years with his problems, and he had more [problems] than just his legs. He had all sorts come out on his body, like great big blisters, all on his body, and he was going to the hospital a lot. I asked for his pension and they said no because it said on his death certificate "heart attack". I asked the [Royal] British Legion and they wouldn't do anything, and they never did do anything. I was so bitter because he'd given his life, and I always said that the British Legion came first in his life. Carol and Dawn came second, and I came third, and he'd do anything for anybody to do with the British Legion, but when it came to me ... I got nothing, no help, nothing.

So, anyway, I can't remember how long, but they offered me £60 to live on. That was my pension, my ordinary pension. £60. A young girl of eighteen came to the house and I'll never forget her and she said, "Oh, that's enough for you to live on". And I was broken-hearted. I can't remember how I got going but I did. I got in touch with ... and I must have got in touch with somebody because I was the President and then the Vice-President of the Women's Section of the Royal British Legion. I sold poppies for about 25 years. I've got a special brooch they presented me with. I think it must have been through the Women's Section, I must have got in touch with somebody, and they sent me a form to fill in, and I sent it off to the War Widows' Association, and they turned me down. Then I tried again. They said I could appeal, and I did.

So, I had to go to London then and I had to go before this committee and there were about five different people in this committee. There was a consultant, a British Legion person, there was a lady, and I can't remember who else, and there was a secretary who was writing it all down. They said somebody could go with me, and my sister ... Sorry, I'll have to have a drink of water ... Her husband worked on the railway so she got a free railway ticket, and she said, "I'll come with you". So we went, and the day we went, there was a strike on the Underground and we couldn't get a taxi, so we walked from the station all the way to ... I think it was Whitechapel, I'm not sure. We walked all the way and we asked a policeman and he said, "Oh, it's straight up this road, ten minutes".

Anyway, we walked all the way and when we got there, we went and found it, and then we went and found a café that was near, to have a drink and something to eat. So then I went in and I'd got a file, a deep file of my husband's that they'd sent me a copy of, that came from the hospital and everywhere. On one, and they pointed out one of these, it said that this doctor said that there was nothing really wrong with my husband, [that] his wife was overbearing. Anyway, they said, "What have you got to say about that?". So, I said, "My husband was very ill all the time and he wouldn't let me get the doctor and I had to push him". And I said, "And that particular doctor was a very young doctor, and he upset me. He said that my husband couldn't speak for himself. I had to speak for him because he wouldn't, and he would never complain about anything. And my doctor would tell you that".

I used to have to nearly fall out with him [my husband] to get the doctor to see him and I said, "That's how he was with the hospital". And I went in this particular day and told this doctor about these horrible blisters that came out all over his body, and I said [to the committee], "I told him [the doctor] because my husband wouldn't say anything and that's why that doctor wrote that". Anyway, I can't remember, but it seemed a long time I was in [with the committee], and we came out and this secretary said, while we were out and they discussed it, she said, "Can I look at your rail ticket and your taxi for coming up here?" And I said, "We've walked". And she said, "You've what? You've walked?" I said, "There was nothing. We couldn't get a taxi and the Underground was on strike". So she said, "You have a taxi going back. We'll pay for your lunch". And she said, "What about your sister?" And my sister said, "Oh, no, I've got a free ticket, so I don't need any money". So, she [the secretary] said, "Are you sure?" So, she [my sister] said, "Yes".

Because we were honest, I think that helped us a bit, but she [my sister] wouldn't let her [the secretary] give us the money because she'd got a free rail ticket. Anyway, then they called me in and this consultant, all the way through, he'd looked so severe at me and I said to my sister, "I won't get it because he looked as if he didn't believe me". And he said ... Sorry, I'm going to cry now ... He said, "My dear lady," he said, "I believe every word you've said. And if anybody wants that pension, you do, and you'll get all your back money". And they also gave me some money towards Bill's funeral. So, that's how I got my War [Widows'] Pension, but I had to fight for it.

I: Only because you yourself fought for it ...

R: Yes, I fought for it, and of course nobody told me I could do that. Our lady at the British Legion, the Women's Section, it must have been, either the President or one of them, that said, "You know, why don't you fight?" Because you sit and tell people your problems, don't you, when you go to meetings. Not in front of everybody, but when you're having a committee meeting, you say, "Oh, yes, I can't get a pension and they won't let me have it". I mean, I got full pension for him, and when he got it, he got full pension. You see, nobody gave us any advice when he came out the Army. Nobody at

all ... never told him that he could get a pension. He said, "If I take it, I won't be able to get work anywhere". And it should have been the other way around.

So, they're very lucky nowadays, and I'm very glad that they have counsellors. Bill nor I never saw any counsellors. Nothing. There was nothing. So, that's a big step forward, and I think the War Widows [Association] have done a lot towards that, haven't they? They've done an awful lot.

I: So there's more support now?

R: Yes, but I've never asked them for anything, you know. When my daughter was ill, and she was ill at one time, you know, I was paying for all the prescriptions, and I didn't know, we didn't know 'til about five years after that she'd already been written as disabled and we shouldn't have been paying. And I'd been paying all those years for her prescriptions, and it was only once when the nurse came to see her ... Because she used to go in hospital and have an operation, and the consultant he used to say to me, "Will you have her at home? You can look after her better than we can". And he used to bring her home, and I used to have to do all her dressings and everything, and the nurse used to come every few days to check everything was alright.

One day she was writing this big list of dressings and I said to her, "Can you not make it so long?" And she said, "Why?" And I said, "I have to pay for them". Oh, and she went berserk and she said, "No more. Leave it with me". She came in the next day with a carrier bag full of stuff. She said ... I don't know whether I should be putting this in writing ... She said, "All the old people in Derby were getting every month a box of dressings". And she said, "The wardrobes are full of them, never been opened". So she said, "I've been round them all, and I've got some for you". So, if you think that shouldn't be in [the interview recording], you'd better take it out. [Laughter.]

But that's how it was. I never had anything from anybody, at any time. Neither the British Legion nor anybody, and Bill wouldn't ask. He was on the committee that gets money for people, and he got it for everybody, but he wouldn't get anything for us. He said, "No". He wouldn't ask for anything.

I: How long after your husband died was it that you got that pension?

R: I can't remember. I think it was about a year, if not more, but I got all my back money for that which was more than he did when he got his. I still think that was wrong that he didn't get his back money, and I think if we'd have had somebody to fight for him, I think he would have got it. So, no-one, but there was the British Legion and I'm all for them getting all this help they get because my husband should have got some help from somewhere when he was ill because I looked after him all the time and sometimes he couldn't even get off the settee, and he was very stubborn. He used to go upstairs on his bottom, when he couldn't walk because we lived in a house and he used to go upstairs on his bottom to go to bed.

I: And all his injuries and illness were due to being in action?

R: Yes, being wounded, and I think my daughter's illnesses are to do with it because they keep saying they don't know what's caused it. It's not hereditary, and she's had that many operations and that many things wrong and I've always said ... He laid in the jungle in Korea – and I only know what he told me – for two days before he was picked up, and it was monsoon time. So, he laid in the jungle for two days and two nights before they found him, and do you know who he said found him? Salvation Army people, they were right up behind them on the frontline.

I: And that's how he got rescued?

R: And that's how they found him, and they got the helicopter and he was one of them that came out on a stretcher and was taken to the MASH station. We used to have to watch all the old MASH things, and he said, "That's exactly how it was". Just as it showed you on the film, them running out and then coming back and operating and getting down on the floor when they hadn't got an operating table. And he said it was just like that. But he wouldn't tell us anything about it, and I know lots of things happened in Korea because I could hear them talking, but they wouldn't let me hear them. They said that it wasn't for women to hear, and it was those [veterans] talking between themselves, and it must have been a horrific time. I understand now, more than I did then. When you're young, I used to think that he's got no feelings, and it must have been true, he must have left them in Korea. I was so sorry when he couldn't go to Korea to be presented with these things.

PR: Shall we take a look at them?

R: Yes. That's his Northumberland Fusilier thing, but he was in the Sherwood Foresters. That was his little sailor that they gave him on his 21st, and that's the ship, the HMS Fowey, but it was a cruise ship.

PR: So, can you describe it again for us, Sylvia? So, he was given this ...

R: He was given that for his 21st birthday on the cruise ship. They were on beds on the deck, the two of them, and he said they were spoiled silly by all the people that were on the cruise.

PR: This was after he got out of Korea, wasn't it?

R: Yes, this was when he was coming back from the hospital as a wounded soldier, you see, coming back to England. They were his medals.

I: Right, what have we got here? There's two.

R: That's his Korea one.

I: So, this is from Korea?

R: Yes, the South Korean government. Yes, it's just the two. One's in Korean and one's in English.

I: That's lovely.

R: And this goes with that. These are what they sent him and they go with that. On Remembrance Sunday, I wear the little one.²¹

PR: Where do you go for Remembrance Sunday, Sylvia?

R: Here, at our Church in the village. I always have a wreath, I always ask for my wreath and they send it me.

I: Have you ever been down to London for Remembrance.

²¹ See Fig. 4 and Fig. 5.

R: Once.

I: Did you? With the War Widows' [Association]?

R: Yes, once, but it's quite a few years ago. Oh, I did the walk across, and I've got that in there. Yes, I did the walk across at the show [on Remembrance Sunday].

I: The British Legion one, yes? What year was that? Can you remember?

R: No. Quite a few years. Anyway, I've got it in that cupboard there, the programme and that'll be the year. It was the year that singer wore the poppy dress.

That's twelve years ago. Can't believe it's twelve years. I didn't tell anybody I was going, you know, and they were all saying the following week, they were saying, "Was that you on the TV?" And I said, "Yes". Well, I didn't want them to think I was bragging.

They're all my *Courages* [the War Widows' Association newsletters].

PR: Oh, you collect them all?

R: They're all in there, yes.

I: So, is that your contact run out with the War Widows, you don't see anybody else?

R: No, nobody comes to see me. I put an advert in the paper, local paper, to see if there was any in Skegness who would like to come and join me for a cup of tea or coffee and nobody answered. Nothing.

I would like to go to the Forces Day again. I've been to one at Nottingham but it took me that long to get there.

I: Oh, it's in Liverpool this year.

R: Yes.

I: They had one at Cleethorpes one year, didn't they?

R: Yes, and I was going, but something happened to stop me because there was one of the coach services was running a coach. Oh, I know, he was going at nine in the morning and he wasn't coming back 'til nine o'clock at night and it was too long and I couldn't get back from Cleethorpes on my own. I think my daughter was away on holiday because she's got a car, but she works full-time, you see, so it's just now and again.



Fig. 1: Sylvia Elliott with a photograph of her first husband, William H. Plowman, his Korean War Veteran medals, and the doll he received on the cruise ship that transported him back to England after he was wounded in Korea. 10 May 2017.



Fig. 2: Sylvia (middle) and William (left). 1952.



Fig. 3: Sylvia with eldest daughter. 1950s.

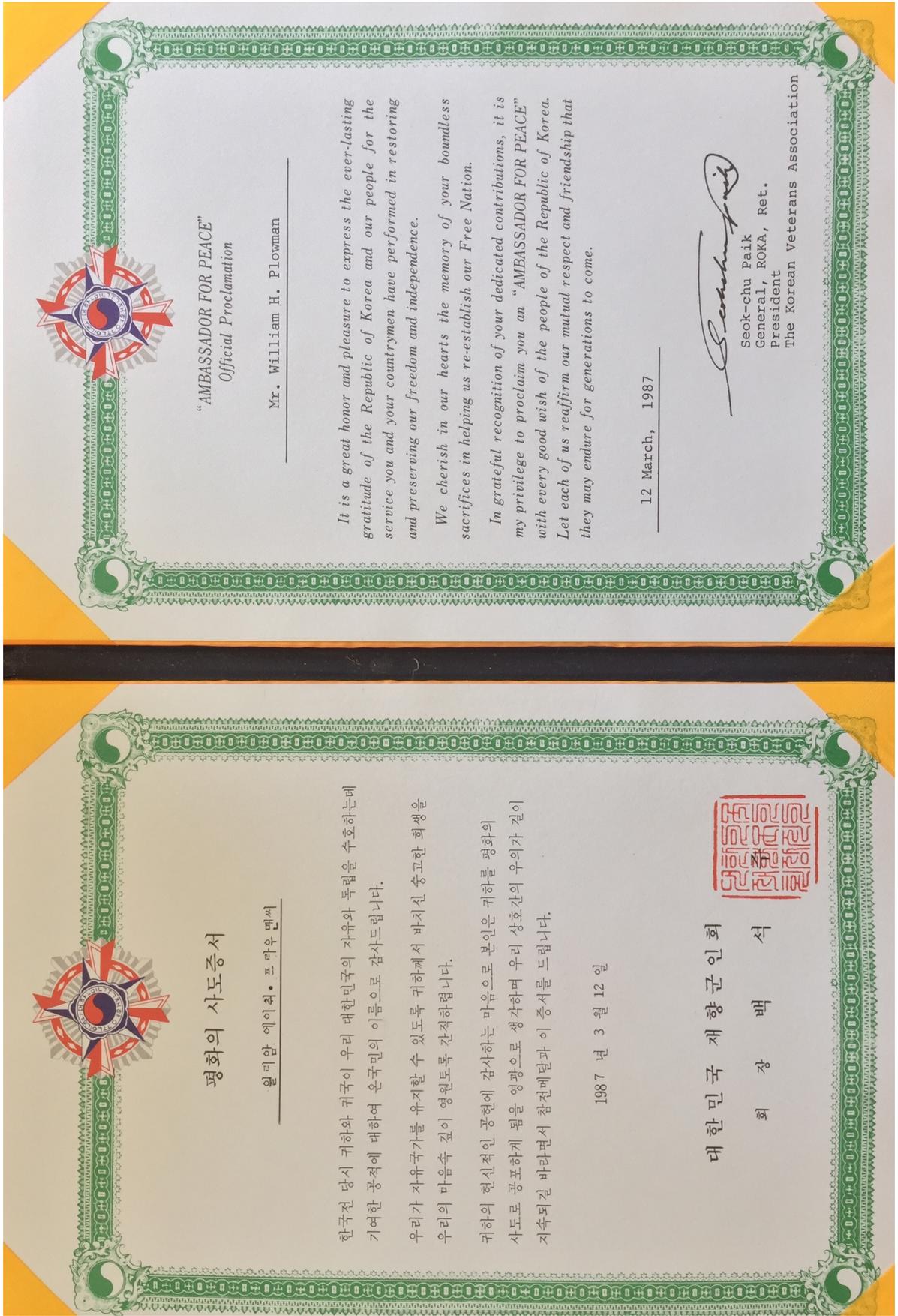


Fig. 4: Commendation accompanying William Plowman's Korean War Medals.



Fig. 5: William Plowman's Korean War Medals.



War Widows' Stories

History. Memories. Heritage.

An Interview with Maggie Goren

5 June 2017

Conducted by Nadine Muller



The War Widows'
Association
of Great Britain



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To do so, and for any other questions about this interview, how you may use it, or about the project, please contact Dr Nadine Muller via email (info@warwidowsstories.org.uk), or by post at the following addressing: John Foster Building, Liverpool John Moores University, 80-98 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, L3 5UZ.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

I = Interviewer

R = Respondent / Interviewee

[] = Clarification note

I: So, today is the 5th June 2017. Could you tell me your full name, please?

R: My full name is Ina Margaret Goren. Called, Maggie, sorry.

I: It is all right.

R: [Laughter.]

I: How old are you, Maggie?

R: I am 79.

I: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood, and where you grew up?

R: I was born in London. I grew up in Hertfordshire, and, let me see, I was born in 1937, so it was just before the second World War. We were outside the evacuation area, although my father worked in White Hall, alongside Mr Churchill and in 1944 we were evacuated for one year. My parents took us down to Cornwall with my grandparents to look after us when the doodlebugs started coming over because they could drop just about anywhere. So, he [my father] had dug a shelter underneath the garage but, unfortunately, one night with the children, three of us, on bunk beds set against the wall and my mother and father slept on a lilo on the floor and my mother flung out her arm in a dream and found that she was in water. Leapt up on the lilo and promptly fell into the water, it had risen through the clay. [Laughter.]

So, that was the end of that bunker, shelter, whatever you like to call it. So, then we went off to Cornwall where I had an absolutely brilliant time. Well, sort of. I loved the countryside, so it was lovely. Loved the seaside, so it was lovely. And I can honestly say, although my son doesn't believe this, that I knew about a war being on but at that age, age 7, it doesn't affect you. It is just a happening. All right, separated from the parents. I think they came down twice in that year. But, basically, you are not aware. How can you be aware of what's going on? I met various uncles who were in the forces and so on. But, there you go. So that was my youth – childhood, really, not youth. [Laughter.]

I: What did you get up to in Cornwall, then?

R: Well, I can tell you that there were no buses. There were very few cars on the road in 1944 so we three children walked to school which was a school that was housing all the evacuees in the area. So, I don't know how many there were in the one class. I think we were all in the one class, as I remember it. We walked two and a half miles to school and then we walked two and a half miles home and we didn't think anything off it at all. Rather different from today. So, oh yes, something really wonderful happened, which was sad in a way. There was a convoy that had got as far as off the North Coast of Cornwall then, obviously heading for port somewhere, and one of the ships was torpedoed and it lost, well, I don't know about loss of life but there was certainly a loss of the contents, which was food for Great Britain in those days, from America, which happened to land up on our beach.

About a mile away the beach was, a very long, sandy beach, and these crates of food, which were all wrapped in oiled wrapping. All perfectly dry. There was powdered egg, which was the only egg we could get in those days. There was sugar. There was chewing gum galore, which I was not allowed to have any chewing gum. But ... so whether that was meant for the US forces in Britain, I don't know. What else was there? Egg, sugar, chewing gum, chocolate! Loads of chocolate, and it was amazing how that beach suddenly was full of people dragging stuff out of these broken up cardboard boxes that had floated to the shore and were absolutely intact. So, I don't quite remember why we were down there. And, I'm sure it was at dead of night, when the coast guards weren't around [laughter], but it was a bit like that story Whiskey Galore. A story of Compton Mackenzie, when probably whiskey that was going out of Scotland towards the United States the ship was wrecked, and they made a film of it, didn't they? So, it was a bit like that. So, you couldn't forget that.

I: Did you get anything of the precious cargo?

R: Oh, yes. Not the chewing gum, but we certainly had chocolate and egg powder and sugar. Not very much. I was with my grandparents, they were very, you know, they probably thought it wasn't quite the right thing to do. But, then, if we didn't have it who else would have it, you know? So, that was one happening. As children we used to collect the eggs from the barns from the chickens. So we had fresh eggs, we didn't need powdered egg. Then we lived on the back side of the farmhouse. The farmer very kindly had arranged with my parents that we should live there. We had a bedroom above, we had a living room below. My grandmother had to cook on a paraffin oil stove.

I can remember, on one occasion, there was a door into the kitchen of the main farmhouse where they had a Dutch oven, which is a coal or wood-fired oven, where the farmer's wife did all the cooking and she knocked on our door and said would we like some apple pie and ambrosia? Ambrosia was the name for cream, which was not real cream. And in came this apple pie which was as tough as old boots but the cream was absolutely delicious. It was homemade farm cream. She said to us, "Now, my dears," she said, "that's ambrosia. We don't have real cream here. That's ambrosia." Well, we knew no better [laughter]. So, it was a wonderful time. Enjoyed it. [Laughter]. Then got back to ... VE Day must have happened down there. And then we got back to London and Victory over Japan took place, and that was more or less the end of the War for me as a child.

I: So, whilst you were in Cornwall, do you know anything about what your parents' lives looked like in London?

R: Not really. My father was working at the Home Office ... or the War Office I think then, because he was a civil servant, working in Whitehall. He did talk about various people that were in and out of the underground bunkers below Whitehall, where the War Office

had all its planning departments and whatever. The one thing he did tell me was he was an ARP Warden, that's Air Raid Precautions Warden. After his work he would have days where he would stay there at night and would go up on the roof and they'd watch bombs falling and their job was to get people safely to shelters, or as he once told me, to pick up parts, body parts, when people didn't quite make it to the shelter, or a building got a direct hit. And as he was a pacifist, he was always prepared to go and work as a Medical Orderly on the front line. He offered his services but he had a reserved occupation in Whitehall.

But, obviously, he would have been a Doctor if he had had the chance of an education, which he didn't because of his father being killed in the First World War. So basically, he helped as much as he could. I think my mother was a secretary somewhere. So that's what they did. They came down to visit us twice in Cornwall, but I don't think ... I think we got on with life, we didn't miss them. We were always really glad to see them [laughter] and sad when they went but then we got on with life again. We were only children.

I: Well, you find treasure on the beach, so

R: Absolutely. Oh, it was wonderful, for me. But, there you go.

I: So, this was towards the end of the Second World War –

R: Yes.

I: – your father was working at the War Office, you said he was a pacifist and as you have also already mentioned, he lost his own father in the First World War. Do you want to tell me a little bit about your father and his childhood?

R: Yes.

I: Do you know about it?

R: There were three sons.²² My father was the third son, and there was one on the way, in 1918, and his father ... I don't know when his father went for his military service, or joined up, or was made to join up, or required, rather, to join up. I don't know. But he was in France, he was in the trenches and from the letters you get, you realise that these men did not want their families to know what dreadful circumstances they were in, what a terrible life they were leading. Horrendous situation, really. So they would write letters home and be very ... well, you would think they were almost on holiday abroad. It's very sad, I think. I don't know if he wrote to my grandmother. He obviously came home on leave because my grandmother was pregnant in 1917. My father's father, Lance Corporal Matthew Evans, was actually killed in April 1918, and his fourth son was born in May 1918. So my grandmother had four sons to bring up. She had hoped that this little boy who was born in 1918 would be a girl because [with] three sons, she thought perhaps she might get some feminine help from a little girl. I don't know how she felt. Her husband wasn't there. It always chokes me. Her husband wasn't there, this child was born, and I don't think she had much family. She had come from Suffolk. You can't imagine it, really. Then, it turns out to be a boy. Another boy. The fourth boy. So she dressed him in dresses and kept his hair long until he was about three.

Now my father was six when his father was killed, and I do know a story that I put it in a poem somewhere ... that all the widows were sent so-called medals. They were base

²² See Fig. 1.

metal actually but they were in a star shape, and they were sent in a little box ... maybe a bit of velvet in it and a ribbon attached, and that was that. And I suppose my grandmother, at that time ... that is what you got. I mean, let's face it, the government was impoverished by that time by the war. So they sent these little medals out. My father, apparently, and I am not sure whether it was a couple of years later, he took this medal out of the box, he threw it across the room, and he stamped on the box. So he was obviously ... unforgiving, if you like.

Now, the children had all gone to church. I think it was the thing to do in those days, and I believe he was a choir boy. Maybe his mother required him to go to church after his father was killed. But I can tell you that when he was an adult he didn't go to church. He had lost any faith that he might have developed because he just saw war as carnage, as not the way to achieve anything in life, and especially the First World War, let's face it, was not a war of defence. It was a war ... well, set up by a couple of madmen. Well ... what was his name? The Kaiser ... I have forgotten his name now. So when the Second World War began, he [my father] did register as a pacifist. In fact, his youngest brother, born after the war, also became a pacifist, but he was only seventeen or eighteen. He had to go before a tribunal and my father did the defence for him in that tribunal. So he went into the Pioneer Corps, and so he did his army service in the Pioneer Corps. The other two brothers, one was very pleased to be a Captain in the war. He came up through the ranks, I think. The other one was in the aircraft industry, building gun turrets for aircraft at DeHavillands,²³ I think. Anyway, that is my father's part in a ... well, his childhood and part in the Second World War.

I think I would say he was really deeply, affected by the loss of his father, although he was well aware that many families had lost many more of their family members in the First World War. So he was always conscious of that but I think it had an effect on the way he thought and behaved and that trickled down to our generation really. He was a man who found it very difficult to express his emotions. But, he was a man of great principle and there were times in family history where things went wrong and he was always there. But he wasn't a man who could express his emotions and you wonder if that goes back to the time of losing his father ... and his mother, perhaps how she dealt with it. I don't know. I know I was ... she was a woman who couldn't express her emotions. Maybe that was all wiped out at the time that happened. It's difficult to imagine these days, isn't it? I mean, there is so much help available today.

There was no help ... as you know the other mothers up the road had the same thing happen to them. I do remember, she died in 19 ... oh, when was it ... 1948, she died. My father said it was the only time he ever saw her weep, shortly before she died. So, I don't know, there were many, many years of not weeping. She was a very strong character. Very strong character. I stayed with her for a bit, when my mother was ill in hospital. I admired her but she wasn't a person that you could get very close to, really. She enjoyed having me, I was her granddaughter. [Laughter.]

I: Do you remember when this was, roughly?

R: This was when I was about eight. So, it would be shortly before she died. Yes.

I: Were you aware, at that age, that your grandfather had died in the war?

R: Oh, yes.

I: Were you aware that she was a war widow?

²³ Respondent correction: Boulton Paul.

R: I wasn't really. Yes, I was aware that her husband had died and that my father was a little boy when his dad had died. I think I would ... I wanted her to tell me more, to talk to me but I realised she was private, so you couldn't go there. But, how she lived, I am not quite sure. Because they didn't have the handouts they have got today. One funny story was that the milkman fancied her but I don't think he was prepared to take it further than that with four sons. Perhaps he had a wife, I don't know. [Laughter.]

Oh dear ... But, no, she never remarried, of course. So she had to manage, and I know what her four sons did: they bought the house for her. Because they all had to go out to work very early from the age of fourteen, something like that, and they managed to buy the house for her that she lived in, in Kingsbury, West London. So, yes, I was sad when she died because I thought that lady hasn't had a life. That is what I thought, when I was quite young. So it affected me more than anything else. That was my first real contact with someone, you know, who had been involved with a war, lost their husband. It bothered me. I thought, how could she manage four children, four sons. How did she bring them up? I don't know. And, my parents never talked about it.

I: So, did your dad ever tell you anything about his childhood?

R: Virtually nothing.

I: So, he was equally private, was he?

R: Yes. He was very private. Until, of course, I suppose I can mention at this stage, that he ... I tell you he didn't go to church but when I came back from abroad with my family and came to live in the countryside near them because my father wasn't very well at the time, and we went to an Armistice Day service at the church and he came. We had a new, young vicar, and I think he was focussing on, "well, we should think of peace. We should do this, we should do that". And he [my father] had gone there to remember his father and there were other people from the services who were there and they were equally a bit disappointed with the vicar's address. Well, he was only about 27 at the time, and he [my father] wrote to his aunt. She was my grandfather's sister, my grandfather who got killed. He was badly affected by that service and I can read you a bit.

I: So, he wrote this to ... ?

R: He wrote this to his aunt. Aunt Lucy, who was really getting on at that time. She may have even been 90, I don't know.

I: She was his dead father's sister ...

R: Yes, his dead father's sister. So, he said:

"I thought of you on Sunday last. We attended the annual Armistice service at our local church and so my thoughts were centred on 1918 and the loss of father, who you knew far better than we as children. There were, of course, many present who had suffered a similar or greater loss, in both wars, and who, I am sure, shared my disquiet after listening to the address by our very young vicar, who displayed a complete lack of comprehension of the feelings of those with a personal experience of what Remembrance Day is all about. I have felt very depressed by the thought that each new generation fails to learn from the experience of the past. And then, yesterday, our daughter Margaret sent up to me a little poem which she had written in memory of her grandfather, who of course she never knew. I am enclosing a copy and I think that you will agree with me that all is not lost and that at least some of the present generation have got it right. I knew vaguely that on a trip to France she had gone out

of her way to visit one or two cemeteries from both wars. But, I had no idea how deeply she felt.”

I: So, of course, he is referring to you there, Maggie?

R: He is referring to me there, and –

I: You wrote him a poem ... ?

R: I wrote him a poem, because I realised he was upset at this particular service. So, I went home and I went quietly into our front room, and I sat and wrote a poem.

I: How old were you then, when you wrote this?

R: Oh, I had my children then. I was –

I: This was in 1980, was it, this was Remembrance Day 1980?

R: 1980, yes. So, we had come back from Israel in 1977, so I was about 43 when I wrote this poem.

I: Do you want to read it to us?

R: Yes, if you would like me to read it? It's just called ...

'Remembrance Sunday 1980'

(To The Memory of My Grandfather Killed in Battle 1918)

“Every year, it is the same:
autumn melting on the pavements,
a mild astonishment that weather
could be so suitably grey.

No mourning in the trees,
but for chance lightning,
act of God,
they drop their leaves naturally.

Every year, it is the same,
the inexplicable sorrow falling
like snow on the old olives
and the green age hawking
among their gnarled roots,
act of God,
until the spring shoots.

Every year it is the same,
cold tears spilling into hearts
from vast seas of graves,
rolling in a deafening quiet
along our numbed nerves,
hurting our foolishness
into self forgetting,
act of faith,
where deeper homage serves.

I walked amongst you once
at Arromanche,
the air so still,
I hardly dared to breath.
It seemed just then a sacrilege
to stare, and turn away,
for part of me is there, in you,
in this day, which is all my days.”

I: Your father clearly appreciated it.

R: I believe my mother said she had never seen him cry before but he cried when he read that.

I: He felt that, unlike the vicar, you had captured remembrance.

R: He was surprised that I related in any way to his father and his suffering, I suppose. So he thought it didn't go down from generation to generation.

I: Because, he didn't talk much about it?

R: Because he wouldn't talk about it. So, there we go.

I: But yet it sounds like you have always been keenly aware of how he was affected, of losing his father and being brought up by a war widow?

R: Yes. I think in some way the lack of ability to show emotion affected my brothers as well as myself. I was kind of the apple of his eye because I was the girl. I was the sandwich, between two boys. I kind of thought like him. I had his mental approach to life, you know. But, my elder brother, who was brilliant, actually... and he went to Cambridge and he studied zoology, biology, natural sciences. My father was very disappointed because he couldn't see the point of that... when, if he had that kind of brain, why couldn't he become a doctor? Which is what he had always wanted to do. I think he would have been a very good doctor. But, if you have to go out of school at fourteen and get a job, which was with the Post Office, as a sorter... although he had been offered a scholarship ... I mean, this was just a working-class family. My father was bright and he had been offered a scholarship but my grandmother couldn't afford for him to take it up, she had no money.

I: A scholarship for...?

R: For a secondary school, where he would have gone on, you know... and he left at fourteen. He would have gone on until eighteen, probably perhaps to university. The money wasn't there. She probably said no, you know, the other boys aren't doing it. He was the only one that got offered a scholarship. So she couldn't possibly, you know, favour one child over the other. So, yes, that's what happened. He was upset with my elder brother because he saw him wasting his talents. Actually he [my brother] became a brilliant naturalist. He has been awarded prizes and all sorts. Now lives in North Scotland and I am going to see him shortly. So, yes, he is a lovely guy, but he was deeply affected by my father's attitude, generally. He [my father] was harsh. I think even my own children [...] ... one of them recognises my father as being very stern and severe. He was a man of great compassion, actually. But, he had difficulty showing this. Hardly surprising. So, yes, I think my elder brother suffered from this. Maybe the younger one too, I don't know.

I: So, after your grandfather died and your grandmother was left a war widow ... you don't know any particular details, do you, about what help she may have got, if any? Because, she didn't talk about it ... ?

R: There was a pension, but you can find it for yourself what the pension was in 1919, 1920, whenever it was. It was a very small pension. So, all the boys had to ... they delivered newspapers, they did all sorts of other jobs before they actually got a job. But they all had to get together and provide some money. But I mean how she managed up to the time Well my father was six. He was the third in line. So, the other boys would have been probably eight and ten, something like that. So, you know, for all that period she had had to manage on her own, I think, without anything other than a war widow's pension. I am sure your association would be able to find out what that was.

I: It was minimal.

R: It was absolutely minimal. There were no child benefits and all this sort of thing which people assume today is a right and a necessity. Somehow she survived and I can tell you that all four sons became independent and got on with their lives and achieved... bought their own homes ... had good lives. And I think that was partly her strength. She was a bit of a disciplinarian. She had to be. How can you be anything else with four sons? I know. I have got four sons [laughter]. So they didn't grow up believing that somebody owed them a living, no way. I can remember my uncle, that was the second one, Uncle Ernie, he was a great laugh. He wanted to get out from under his mother's shoes, so he went up to what was called the Welsh Harp. I think it is still there in North West London. It wasn't a mile away, hardly that. He had a good time with what you would call the ... was it the post-war hippies?

They were all hanging out around the Welsh Harp sleeping rough, swimming, sunbathing, it must have been summer. Because, he told me about it, and oh, the sort of people he met. He said, for example, there was one lad there who used to earn sixpence going to local dances where he would hire himself out to ladies who had nobody to dance with [laughter] ... a bit of a gigolo. Then he would get back and sleep on the bank of the Welsh Harp in the rough. But, yes, he said, oh he was a gigolo and they would be queuing up to get, you know ... For a sixpence he could buy his fags out of that and a bottle of beer etc. That was after the Second World War. So, he had to get out from under his mother's feet, and yes, it was tough all round really. But they all made their way, these four lads. One became a car mechanic engineer, had his own garage. One of them did all sorts, owned 21 houses, at the last count. He was a cabinet maker before the war, but then he did all sorts of things. He was a foreman in charge of what went on at Wembley Stadium in the... probably in the 60s, I think. And then the other one become a civil servant, and worked at Colindale Newspaper Museum. My father carried on in the civil service and became a Senior Executive Officer.²⁴ So they all did okay, thanks to the strength of their mother. But I believe in female strength and what upsets me is that it is not only still going on, it is getting worse! They say, "Oh, there are less wars now." Are there? I don't know. There are more people killed in a more disgusting way. That is my feeling. And it is always the women who have to pick up the pieces.

I: And, of course, your grandmother lost her husband in the First World War only to then see her four sons potentially put in danger by yet another one.

R: Well, certainly two of them were. I can remember the second one, who was building... well, he was the one who had been the cabinet maker but during the war he was working

²⁴ Respondent correction: Higher Executive Officer.

in the aircraft industry and they were making gun turrets. Many, many years later he was here. Well, he was 80, I think. And he was talking about a fellow worker or a pilot. They used to do tests [of gun turrets] over the Hampshire, sorry, the Southampton waters. One of them came down ... and he burst into tears, at the age of 80. You don't realise how these things affect people, you know. So I never saw my father cry. I didn't. My mother did, but not me.

I: Did he ever talk about those days when he first had to go to work at the Post Office? Did he have any stories about that? About his early jobs?

R: I can tell you something funny. He was a Post Office sorter when I was born. So it had that on my birth certificate, and he then took the civil service exam and passed easily and then started his upward grade in the civil service. So he was a little bit He never denied being a Post Office sorter, but he didn't actually want it to appear on my birth certificate when I had to present my birth certificate to somebody, so he put a piece of elastoplast, over the piece which said PO Sorter. I knew it said that underneath [laughter]. So he was obviously slightly bothered by this. Proud man [laughter]. But he talked about the days of Mount Pleasant ... I think where he worked as a sorter. Of course it's all done digitally now, they just feed in the envelopes and they read the postcode and that is it. They used to have people sitting there, sorting out all these letters and putting them in the right slot. But he wasn't there long because he was very bright really. A bright man. But at least they made sure that we all had a good education. That's one result of, you know, if you don't get it yourself, you make sure your children have it. So we all went to good schools. In fact, they [my parents] left Hertfordshire, just outside Potters Bar, came into London to ensure that we would all get a good education. After the Second World War, of course. Yes.

I: How do you think your father felt about not having been able to have an education?

R: He was very proud and I think he refused to admit that it made a lot of difference. He rose quite quickly in the civil service. He finished up by being the secretary to the Anglo-Egyptian Resettlement Board in 1956 after the Suez Canal debacle. All the Brits were chucked out of Egypt and he had to... he was the secretary of that Board. He did quite well but, I think, in refusing to admit that education might have helped him. He read He would never read any literature, he said to me 'it's not true'. I was a great reader of books because I went to a good school and I was an avid reader. My father said, 'I am not reading that sort of stuff,' whether it was Dickens or Trollope or Jane Austen. 'It is not true', he said. So, he would only read biographies, you see. I think he would resent the fact that somebody thought he hadn't made his way and wasn't clever enough without an education. I remember I once said to him would he like to join our evening class. My husband and I went to a philosophy class every week. For ten years we went to these classes.

He looked at me strangely, as if to say, how dare I suggest that he needed to go to philosophy classes? I mean, I was going for the edification of it, to learn something. So there was something there about his having missed the opportunity but the big thing he felt bad about is he would have liked to have been a doctor. So he was always there in the house to mend people, if something went wrong. You know he would have books on it and so on. But, otherwise, he didn't want anybody to mention that he wasn't He wrote beautifully, you know, but he did leave school at fourteen and that was that.

I: You have got a letter here, Maggie, from 1918 ...

R: I have, yes.

I: Can you tell me a little bit about that? You have transcribed it, haven't you?

R: I have written it out because it's ... [difficult to read in parts].

I: By whom is this? And, to whom?

R: Well, it is from my grandfather on the 14th January 1918 to Auntie Lucy:

"My Dear Sis.

In answer to, may I say, many of your interesting letters which I have not been able to answer in turn owing to 'fever' of circumstances." [He was in the trenches, at the time.] I think it is just on a month since I have been able to write anything but field cards to anyone. Annie [my grandmother] tells me it's funny to receive so many of these and no letters. But as long as she receives them she knows I am well and does not mind so much. Well, Sis, I was glad to hear you had a good time Xmas. You can guess I would have loved to have been there. You asked me what kind of Xmas I had? Well, considering Fritz tried to gas me for two hours on Xmas we, beside sending the usual fireworks over and considering it froze our marrow on the 23rd, thawed it on the 24th ... (Something, I can't read) us up on the 25th and washed us out on the 26th, painted us with mud all over on the 27th, for all these trifles we had stew for dinner and tea for tea, 1 loaf between 10 men but plenty of best cream crackers we call them, 10 of us kept ourselves warm by the heat thrown off 1 candle. A very valuable 1, by the way, as it was the last of the Mohicans. These things represent the dull side of my Xmas day. The bright one, was peculiarly 2 parcels. One from mother with items from Dad, Edie, Jack, and Arnold in all. The other arrived from Jessie, fags, chocolates, cake and John's Christmas pudding. I also received just around that date many letters from kind friends so was not at all forgotten and felt contented and bright. The boys of my section enjoyed the contents as well as myself.

Things are much the same in the New Year ... snow for a day or so then thaw and mud and water. OK well one has to see it to realise what it is like. Glad to stay still well and glad to hear from you and all at home same I heard today.

Dear Lucy, I must thank you very much indeed for your kindness to Annie and the boys. This Xmas again I appreciate it far more than anything else I can think of and I'm sure it cheers Annie up ever so much to hear from you because she is so pleased about it when she writes to me and I am glad to say they all are well at home. Herbert [my father] is getting especially fat. [Laughter]. The other boys also get on and Ernie who used to be rather slow is getting quite a nice writer! They all had a good time Xmas, Auntie Lucy, [can't read next words] Dad, Mother, Edie and did very well indeed. You can guess what pleasure it gave me to hear they had done so well. Now, Sis, I must conclude, not because I have nothing to say but have no time. Well, my best wishes for a happy prosperous New Year.

I remain, your loving brother, Arthur Evans, xxxx."

So that was four months before he died ... three or four months before he died. There you go.

I: So, this letter was to his sister?

R: Yes.

I: It sounds like he was in touch with your grandmother, as well?

R: It sounds as though he sent her the field cards and not letters. I don't know why. I think he said more in these letters to his sister. Obviously he didn't want to upset his wife. I mean, he gives a fairly clear description there of what's happening. And, perhaps he didn't say that, he just sent a field card saying ... doing well, getting on all right. Love Matthew ... or whatever. So that's what you imagine. Plus, he was a very nice man, he was a very considerate man, a loving man. So he realised how hard it must be for his wife, obviously, and he didn't want her upset. She had three children, one on the way, when he wrote that to his sister.

I: He sounds very grateful that his sister, clearly, had some involvement with your grandmother. Some contact.

R: Yes, all the time, I imagine. I don't know. I think I met Auntie Lucy once. Another fine lady. A strong lady. And no different from what happened to thousands of others. But it is nice to have that personal recollection and there are some more letters that he wrote to the same sister which I haven't yet, as it were, translated because it is very difficult to read, isn't it? So there you go. So when I heard about the War Widows' Association on the radio, I think it was on Woman's Hour, because I wanted my grandmother's story told for my father's sake and everything, I thought it would be nice, you know, to get in touch and offer what I knew about my grandmother ... as a sort of plea to for goodness sakes stop this fighting, gentlemen. Find a better way to do it. But, of course, you can't and we are suffering now, aren't we, with people who have got ideologies which will land up in terrorism, or ... it's all so sad, really. I don't think there are many women terrorists. There have been some, the Bader Meinhof group. There were some young women involved in that, but, yes, they were revolutionaries, I suppose. But mostly you don't get them blowing themselves up and knifing people on streets. I shouldn't be saying this really, should I? You can cut it out. As I said to you before, it is the testosterone.

But you know, we live in a world where there is such disparity between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'; countries where people can't make a living because of the climate and everything else. We don't seem to be able to share out what we have got, that is the sad thing, more equitably. And then people are surprised when you get young people, who are the most idealistic age I suppose is between 16-25, that's when you need to put the goodness in, if you are going to put it in at any time. Instead of which they are being fed awful ... I don't know. What do you call it? ... People need a sense of identity but if they have to go to the lengths that modern terrorism does just to find an identity, it is a bit sad. What's lacking that young people don't know the difference, you know? All the main religions basically say you shouldn't kill. Women really aren't suitable for fighting because they are the ones who carry the new life in them, and I don't see how you can carry new life and give birth to it and then kill anything, really. That to me, the two things don't go together. But then I think that men and women are biologically different. I get into terrible trouble for this, I really do [laughter]. I have written all sorts of things about it, but yes, just between you and me [laughter] ... you can cut this out. But, yes, there are men you see, who grow up with sensitivity and they don't want to fight. They really don't want to fight. Until they all stop fighting ... but, their governments ... you can see what's happening you know. You have got something, you don't want to lose it. Somebody hasn't got something and wants to grab it. I think we are very uncivilised. I am not allowed to say that in some situations. In some company, I am not allowed to say that we are uncivilised. But, I think we have got a long way to go yet. Yet there is all this aspiration, there's ... I see it, in art and music and literature. There's this aspiration for something better out there. But we are grounded and we are stuck in survival, I suppose, and that involves war. That, I think, mostly involves women getting left behind, you know, with –

I: Like your grandmother?

R: Like my grandmother. Like so many people I have met across this life.

I: It sounds like you have really had a political influence from your father losing his father in the war. You said he was a pacifist?

R: Oh, yes. Yes, well, he was a man of great compassion. I think, he just wanted something better for his own children. He wanted a better life for his own children. Although it was my mother who was very keen on the education ... and going up in the world. She was always trying to get us a better education. Oh dear. But, yes, that's the way he tried to put it right. But do you know, in the end, he moved out of London, because it was dirty, the pollution was getting greater. When was it? It would be around about the 60s... 50s, 60s. So, he retired at 55, and then he had to wait for his government pension until he was 65. But, he came down to the countryside, where I am now, South Warwickshire. Basically, he restored cottages, he restored his own... bought one, and restored it beautifully. But I can see him always looking, with his arms across the gate, looking across the countryside he loved so much but with that look in his face of... not quite contented.

Something, basically was wrong there, you know. He went for what he could get. He achieved what he wanted, in a way. He got the countryside. He got the beautiful cottage. But there was something eating at him I think, always. I think they were all affected in the family. But he was affected the most I think, of the four boys. Definitely. So, this had a knock-on effect. So if anybody thinks it is all over when, you know, the father dies, or whatever. No, it is not. It goes down through the offspring.

I: It has an impact over generations?

R: Has an impact, yes, definitely. I mean, I am a pacifist. But I haven't had to stand up in court, or anything like that. I think the arguments are very difficult. The arguments... if you are attacked, you will defend. We are animals. That is what we do. So I am, kind of, a theoretical pacifist [laughter]. Oh dear.

I: I know you said, your father didn't talk that much about losing his father. He doesn't sound like someone who shared an awful lot, and all that kind of thing. But, do you ever recall your father talking about his mother? How did he talk about her, at all? Did you get any sense of his feelings for his mother, or how he perceived her?

R: He was the one who sorted out problems in the family with the other brothers, you know, who fell out with their mother here and there. He was the one who did the sorting out. But he never... well, I was only eight, when my grandmother died. So he might have spoken to my mother about things, about his mother, but I don't think he did a lot. Maybe it was something he shut off in order to get on with life. The fact that he said to my mother, that she [his mother] had never cried ... his mother had never cried until I think my father was at her bedside when she died. I think there was a lot of stiff upper lip. You didn't talk like... I mean, today, I have to talk to my children [laughter]. I don't find it difficult to talk but basically I have been involved with my children. By my parents' standard, that might be considered all a bit too close and that there is not enough gap, and so on. But that is how it is. Because I have always been extremely close to my kids and involved in what they do. But there was a gap between me and my parents.

Especially my father. I remember once my mother telling me, when I was aged eighteen ... could I, when my father came home from work, give him a kiss. I thought, well, I have

never done it before ... I am grown up, how am I supposed to do this? But you know I actually tried it out. I don't think it lasted very long and I am sure he was surprised. I don't know, perhaps he said to my mother: 'You know, I never get a kiss.' But, then he never gave a kiss, so how could he get a kiss? Do you know what I mean? That was one of the strange things that you remember.

I: How did it go down when you tried?

R: Not very well [laughter].

I: A bit awkward?

R: Very awkward. Very awkward. It's like, for example, another effect of his childhood on us was that he decided that we ... I think two of us weren't christened ... I am not sure whether I was christened but I always say I was But basically, he said we wouldn't go to church until we were old enough to think and know what we were saying because, as he used to say, you know you just repeat stuff by rote. When he was a kid in church, which wasn't very long, perhaps up until he was ten, he used to say, 'Our Father, which art in heaven, Harold be thy name', and things like that, you know, so he said, 'it is all by rote.' So he said, he wanted us to go to a church. It is very strange that. He didn't want us to have no religious background whatsoever but we had to wait until we were fourteen and could think for ourselves and then he demanded that we went to church. Which was very strange. My brothers were already scouts, which was attached to the Scottish church in our area. I wasn't keen to go there so I went into the Church of England and I remember feeling a complete freak. I didn't know when to stand up, sit down, kneel, I had no idea. But, you know, I didn't go back and tell my father that. Because he said we should go to church. So I thought he didn't mind which church it was [laughter].

I: But, he still didn't go, of course?

R: He didn't go. He started to go very occasionally, down in the country here. But, then he was in his sixties. He would just go occasionally. Probably because it is a country church, beautiful church, old, and he could feel something in the stone work, you know, centuries of people praying and so on, I don't know. So, he would occasionally go. But the idea that we should all be packed off to church at the age of fourteen and I am not sure I understood much about it more than at fourteen than I did at four [laughter]. Which resulted in none of us really belonging to anything in the end [laughter]. I tried them all. I tried Catholics, I tried Church of England, I tried... oh, that was very funny. This is off the record really, but when I went to my interview with my secondary school, which was City of London School for Girls, a very good school. I had done quite well in the scholarship we did then, at eleven, and I was given an interview.

My mother was on the upward movement towards, you know, conservatism and everything, nice house. I had to tell her what I had told the head teacher in the interview. She [the head teacher] said, "and what church do you go to?" and at the time I was trying out the Scottish church and I said, 'Oh, we are Pedestrians.' [Laughter] And then, for goodness sake, she asked me what papers we read. I mean, this is not on really, is it? But, she asked me, the headmistress, what papers we read. The school was just off Fleet Street, it was down Whitefriars Street. I had to go through all these paper places and you know they used to print the papers down there. All sorts of papers, and the last hoarding I had seen was for the Daily Worker, so I said we read the Daily Worker. I went home and told my mother. She had a fit. She had an absolute fit. She said, 'You will never get into that school.' [Laughter] then of course I did get a place in the school. Now, either the woman had a sense of humour or, I don't know ... or I was a weird one-off. I don't know. But, anyway, a Pedestrian and we read the Daily Worker.

I: What did your mother say to you other than ‘you will never get in’?

R: Oh, she said, “How could you? Where did you get that idea from? We read the Daily Telegraph. We...” You know, I said, “I don’t know what paper you read. I don’t read it.” I was only eleven. [Laughter]. So, that is a story I always tell because I think it is so funny. I don’t know how I got into the school. I have no idea.

I: Well, I am sure you were the only pedestrian Daily Worker reader.

R: [Laughter] I was. Oh dear.

I: Maggie, can I take you back to Remembrance?

R: Yes.

I: I know you told me about, that your father was very unhappy about that particular Remembrance service that he went to in 1980, in response to which you wrote that beautiful poem for him, which he clearly was very moved and impressed by, I gather. What was the ... Do you remember anything about the attitudes towards Remembrance Sunday, or Remembrance weekend? Did you ever remember your grandmother doing anything for Remembrance? Or your father, apart from going to that service?

R: I don’t really. I think they watched the Remembrance Day services on television. I think so. Although, I wasn’t there at the time. But, from report, I think they watched that. You see, it was all very private for him. Maybe, he is like me, he starts crying. He would start crying if he... but he had learnt to ... you know, tie that all up. Tie it inside himself. So, he was probably afraid of these occasions, and I don’t know with my mother. See, we just didn’t talk much, as we do today, gosh, we battle on about politics and everything today. But I used to hear him arguing with his youngest brother, who used to ... who came down to live in the same place, same area. They would argue politics all the time. Admittedly it was my father who had stood up for him in court, over his pacifism, when he was eighteen. I suppose, you wouldn’t be in the army before you were eighteen. But he must have been eighteen, Arthur, at the time. But then they were on different political sides and it always ... lunches, always ended up in political arguments. You knew it was going to happen. It was all perfectly hunky dory through the meal, and then suddenly the chat would start.

My uncle was definitely a socialist and my father was progressing towards conservatism, I think. So, there were these terrible arguments. Then sadly, my uncle died, quite young. Well, he was in his fifties. My father, I think, wanted to play the protector to my uncle throughout his life. And my uncle didn’t really want to be protected by his older brother. But that sprang back from the war years, I suppose. If he was six when ... yes, when Arthur was born. So, a six-year gap. So, he was always the protector. So he had to teach his younger brother a lot, I think. That included politics and arguments and everything ... which you get in families. But, there you go.

I: It is interesting isn’t it, how they both lost their father to the First World War, but it impacts differently, clearly, in political terms, I suppose. That they were –

R: Yes. Absolutely. They were very different characters. My uncle was a very, very emotional man. Now he didn’t talk much about his mother although he went to live with his mother with his wife and baby daughter, just after the war when he was demobbed. That was quite difficult. He was a very emotional man. And she [his mother] wasn’t, you see, so I imagine there was a little bit of difficulty there. I know there was, because I was

there at one time when it happened. It was always my father who had to sort it out. He [my uncle] knew that he had been dressed up as a girl for the first three years of his life, you know, and he rather resented that ... because, he was a nice blokey, bloke. Yes, I think, things were difficult in the Pioneer Corps. I mean, because they would go on their off days to dances and things like that and it was clearly marked that they were Pioneer Corps and they would be in dance halls with servicemen, and there was a spot of bother here and there. But they did ... He was involved with armaments and such ... at Kineton. Then he was up in Lancashire, where he met my aunt.

Yes, he never really mentioned much about ... well, he had a difficult job. He had a baby born and they had to go to my grandmother's and it was her house and she decided how the child should be brought up, you see? [Laughter] you haven't got out of that, have you, of bringing up children? So, yes, there was a little difficulty there. But, at the end, I think my uncle was extremely upset when his mother died. He felt she had had a very rough deal. He was, yes, he was definitely a socialist. He ... you know, he was all for the underdog and I think he considered his mother to have been an underdog, if you like. Had no chance. So, yes, that's all I can say about ... people just didn't communicate, you know, in those days.

I: Do you mark Remembrance? Do you do anything?

R: Well, I sing in the church choir, so I am always there. My son ... I have got musicians in the family because they belonged to the local brass band. One, or other of my sons usually plays the last post at the Remembrance Day service. Although they don't live in the village anymore. Because it is nice to have it played rather than a recording. So last year Dan, my composer son, he played the last post on a flugelhorn. My elder son has got a trumpet, and he plays. I think they are quite, they are quite affected by all this. I can't see any of them being fighters, I don't know what the heck they would do on a battleground. I really don't. I just hope they don't ever have to go there. Well, my eldest is now 45, I think. So, and yes, they have managed to keep peace in Europe, haven't they, for 70 years, is it? Something like that. Apart from previous Yugoslavia. Thank goodness, the United Nations managed to help there, didn't they?

I: Is there anything you would like to say, that we haven't covered? Anything else?

R: [Pause]

I: I should say, in case we can hear this in the background, your cat has joined us.

R: We have lost somebody in a war recently. But, that was Israel. I am married to an Israeli, and –

I: And you lived in Israel?

R: I lived in Israel for four years.

I: When was this, Maggie?

R: 1973-77. So, yes, I experienced the Yom Kippur War, there. Because, we were there in May and the war broke out in October. It was in 2006, the Israeli involvement in Lebanon, where they shouldn't have been and my children's cousin, 21 years of age, just finishing his service, which was three years, I think, two or three years they do there, and he was in a Tank Corps. He was in Lebanon and the Israeli army had been required, or requested by the United Nations to get out of Lebanon at that time. They didn't. My nephew was in a tank that was shot through by a rocket and died. He was 21 and his

mother became a war widow. Not, a war widow, a war mother, if you like, and she was of Latvian origin, Jewish Latvian origin. I got on very well with her when I was there. She really never recovered. She was quite a feisty lady, she was. She became ill about three years later and died shortly after that in her sixties. Her husband followed her, a few years later. So, if people think, you know, war does not have an ... and all those men, in that family of course, have been in the army.

My husband was in the army. In fact, when we got there, he immediately went to find his group and he was on the Golan Heights during the Israeli Yom Kippur War. One of his brothers got wounded with shrapnel but went back in again and the last brother was in a special unit because he was an excellent shot. But that entirely altered his life, I think. He would never talk about it. Never talk about it. Something very bad happened, I think. Well, he wasn't wounded, something he probably had to do. So, you know, when you are young like that and you are fired with some kind of patriotism and all the rest of it, you go and do your duty and then you find it's pretty murky ... your duty. So this boy, he got killed, my nephew. I wrote a poem for his ... well, on his death. I didn't give it to his parents. I wouldn't have given it to his parents because, for example, the last few verses Oh, well I will read it.

Border Badlands (In Memory of "Little' Adam, 1985 - 2006)

"The tank - a scaly,
antediluvian beast,
decked for deceit ~
lumbered into the
still night landscape:

Chinese ink and water,
tranquil, waiting,
stripped to essentials,
moonlit, misted, brushed
in ochre and black,
sky stark at a stroke,
hanging there,
solid back of beast a mere
smudge on grassless terra firma:

turret, gun, infrared eye,
seeking its crippled mate,
rumbling across deadlines
and hate, it's four man crew
alert in Trojan silence
in the dark underbelly:

(The tank went to rescue another tank),

they said it could not be
entered through the side
(unlike cold steel, piercing the
flank of one who died for love
in ancient Israel) - its head
and tail
alone where vulnerable:

so through the tail
the rocket came

in no time at all,
no time to clear
the throat of fear
or lose hope,

no time, at all,
for the dispersal
of flesh to a different
configuration of atoms
that cannot be kissed,

no time to hurt even,

as if nothing human
had been, as if grief
did not exist.”

I didn't send it to the parents ... that was my reaction to his death. My husband was here at the time. He is living in Israel now, but he was here at the time, and got the phone call one night, and we had to go and arrange his flight back and everything. Because, in Jewish law they ... well, normally the ceremony takes place next day, but with those military funerals they can't do it like that. It is quite complicated. They have the military go and talk to the parents and so on and so forth, and then a special funeral is arranged. Well, there was no body, was there. And, of course, they had a coffin and everything, and my sister-in-law, when the coffin came into the kibbutz, she threw herself at the hearse and everything and wanted to see her son. So, I mean, devastating stuff, isn't it?

I: So, war has been a bit of a feature in your life, really, hasn't it? Via your father.

R: Well, I suppose, yes, in a way. I mean, my childhood was throughout the war, yes. I was three when it started, or two, when it started. And, seven or eight ... eight when it ended, I think. So, yes, that is quite a chunk of your childhood. But I wasn't unhappy. I hadn't lost my father, had I, you know ...? But, yes, I brought all my children up to be anti-war. So in that way it had an ongoing effect, yes ... in my own way. I don't thrust things down people's throats, although you may not believe it listening to me [laughter].

I: So, how do you feel about your ... you said your husband was in the military?

R: Yes, I mean, that is automatic, there. They are Reservists to age 45. Anyway, they do so much service a year, you know, to keep them up to scratch. They keep going every so many months, they go and have another six weeks or something, to keep them up to date. But when that happened [the war] it was completely a surprise. Which is what it was intended to be. I think they had finally, these Arab nations, had got in touch with one another which most of the time they are not. So you had Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. Egypt from the South, Jordan from the East and Syria from the North and they closed in ... well, everybody was ... it was Yom Kippur, the most holy day of the Jewish year. So basically, we were having an evening stroll through a grapefruit orchard and we were sitting under a tree eating a grapefruit when somebody came rushing down the track and said war has broken out. We said, what do you mean? We rushed back to the house and my husband disappeared.

He took his toothbrush, and he kept ringing, trying to find out where his old unit ... he hadn't done any ... he had been in England for eighteen years.²⁵ So, this was all new,

²⁵

Respondent correction: six years.

we had been there six months and he hadn't established where his previous unit was, you know, or done any training or anything. Anyway, he was a captain at that time. So I heard from him after about ... how many days? Ten days I think, after they had gone off. I heard that he was in the Golan Heights. He sent me cards, same thing, sent me these little military post cards saying what was happening, more or less. Anything that was not censorable, and I kept those cards and ... they appear in a book I wrote about my four years in Israel. *Going Up, Going Down*, it was called, *The Aliyah of an Innocent*. Aliyah being the word for ascending in the Jewish calendar, alphabet I mean, language [laughter]. So, I found them in a drawer with an elastic band around them and I decided to put them in the book.

I: Of course, you don't know if your grandmother kept the cards then, that your grandfather sent?

R: No. I have no idea. Or, if they were scattered, I don't know. It is a shame, isn't it? I know so little about it. I think I got the feeling that she felt she was just one of thousands. Which was true, wasn't it? One of thousands. Some people had lost two sons, or whatever, three sons. Terrible. I think, they felt it was their job then to just pick up and carry on, that is what they felt. It would be ... well, they didn't actually have a choice, did they? If you have got three kids, or four kids, you don't have a choice, I suppose. Unless you are a complete wimp, in which case you would probably ... I don't know what would happen. No, no, she was a mother. I have got a picture of her out there, by the way, with my grandfather and the three boys which is a very nice picture. So yes, there she was, saying nothing. I don't know about her cards. Nobody ever mentioned any. But she obviously did get them, because the letter says. She probably moved once, or twice, I don't know.

No, today we collect things and one of my brothers who is doing genealogy does all this stuff, finds out about the history. I don't think there was anything left, no, sad to say. That is about it, I think.



Fig. 4: Family photo of Maggie's grandparents with their first three sons. Annie Evans (middle) with husband Lance Corporal Matthew Evans (left), and Ernest Albert Evans (far right), Frederick Arthur Evans (front), and Maggie's father, Herbert Leonard Evans (sitting on his mother's knee). C. 1912.



Fig. 5: Maggie Goren with her grandparents' family photograph. 13 October 2017.

A graphic featuring a white rectangular box with a torn-paper edge, set against a background of vertical red lines and red floral silhouettes. The text 'War Widows' Stories' is written in a black cursive font inside the box.

War Widows' Stories

History. Memories. Heritage.

An Interview with Denise Haddon

5 April 2017

Conducted by Clare Baybutt



The War Widows'
Association
of Great Britain



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To do so, and for any other questions about this interview, how you may use it, or about the project, please contact Dr Nadine Muller via email (info@warwidowsstories.org.uk), or by post at the following addressing: John Foster Building, Liverpool John Moores University, 80-98 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, L3 5UZ.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

I = Interviewer

PR = Project Representative

R = Respondent / Interviewee

[] = Clarification note

PR: It is the 5th of April 2017 conducting an interview for the War Widows' Stories project with Denise Haddon, maiden name King, in the company of interviewer Clare Baybutt and project representative Ailbhe McDaid. For the record can you state your name and your place of birth please?

R: My name is Denise Haddon, and I was born in Dublin, Republic of Ireland.

I: Ok. Well, we'll start with a bit about yourself currently, your current life?

R: Ok. Well, at the moment I see myself, apart from the nice visits to concerts and theatre, such things, I see myself mainly as granny to six grandchildren, and I do a lot with and for them, but [I am] also chief carer to a 100-year-old aunty, not that she's living here, but she's living in a care home nearby. I do everything financially, organise everything for her, go see her every day. That's it really.

I: Following on from that question: past profession ... What did you do?

R: In the early days I worked for the Foreign Office, and then for the BBC, and then for the Jesuits in various capacities, mainly secretarial / PA type work, although for the Jesuits there was some financial management in their Fundraising department. Subsequently, after having children, I retrained as a teacher for teaching refugees and others. ESOL, English for Speakers of Other Languages, it was called at that time. It's changed a bit now, but that's mainly what it was, and I did that for probably ten or twelve years before I retired.

I: Moving onto your childhood and early life ... Hometown?

R: A mixture. I was born in Ireland because my father went off to war, my mother and grandmother, who was herself a widow, were moving around quite a lot between England and Ireland, and it was a weird time because you couldn't just travel willy-nilly. You had to have somebody to claim you in each country, so my gran always had to go first because she had children here, and Mum could then follow with me, and then to get back to Ireland her brother over there could claim, so it was it was all very strange. So that was to-ing and fro-ing. There was no actual hometown. It was Enniskerry, County Wicklow, for a long time; Bray, County Wicklow, for a long time; and then to my

grandfather's in Brookmans Park in Hertfordshire for another long time; and then Woking in Surrey, where I started my first convent school. And then, in 1947, they all moved back to the original house where my mother grew up in Hounslow in West London. So, from the age of about eight onwards until I was seventeen, that was where I was living. It was Hounslow and Cranford, so it was kind of on the edge of Hounslow. Planes didn't quite land in our backgarden, but nearly.

I: So the reason for that moving around, was that military?

R: No, it was just not quite knowing what was happening, maybe one lease coming to an end or the desire to see family who worked for a living over here. But it was mostly Ireland until I was three, and I think it was at that point around about then that Mummy heard that my dad had been killed. I think I was three or four. I've got some letters, actually, that I can show you where they were. They give the date of when she ... I think I was either three or four when she finally heard that he had been killed. Up to that point she didn't know, although she always said she felt it in her bones that he wouldn't be coming back.

I: How did that affect your early life?

R: I think it probably did, you know, if you think that babies pick up emotions and things from their mother. There must have been stuff there that was coming across. She used to talk about my father a lot. Lots of stories about what happened when, and even those early days when he was in Enniskerry and Bray, before he went off, she used to talk about that a lot. Quite a few amusing stories of him pushing the pram in Ireland in 1941. I think he probably was the only man in the whole of Ireland who would dare to push a pram because everyone else would think it was woman's work, "You mustn't push a pram". And he actually changed nappies, which absolutely scandalised the woman of the house. "A man changing a nappy!" So, there are a lot of quite amusing stories. But yes, of course it does affect you, and it leaves a big gap in your life not to have your father.

I: With the moving around, is that something that affected you in making friendships easily?

R: I don't think I thought about it. You know, in babyhood it's neither here nor there once you're with your mum and the people who love you, and as a small child playing in Enniskerry, there were no cars. Nobody had a car. Very few people had cars. We're talking about the early forties – only rich people had cars then. So, the door would be opened in the morning, and I would go off. My gran used to go off to Mass every day, and I would sometimes run off to meet her, and you could let a little thing go off like that. Everybody knew everybody else. Everybody knew if there were any strangers around. Everybody looked after everybody else's children, gave them a clip round the ear if they needed it, a cuddle if they needed it. It was a different world. So, my memories of being there are very fond.

I: What was your education?

R: Convent schools. Started off at a convent school in Woking. I was a day girl for one year, and then I was sent as a weekly boarder when I was six, which wasn't a happy experience. And then after that, when they moved back into their Hounslow house, I was then sent to a convent school in Ealing, and I was there from age seven to seventeen, and then I went off to France for a year, to a convent school in Paris for a year. So that was nice.

I: You mentioned [as] a weekly boarder you were unhappy ...

R: Yes, it was hideous. It was awful. I hated it. I was very scared. I missed being at home, but I was by no means the youngest child there. The youngest was about three, I think, and she used to rock herself to sleep every night. There was no unpleasant behaviour on the part of any of the nuns that were teachers or anything. It wasn't that I was cruelly treated. I wasn't. It was just that I was unhappy at being away.

I: What was your mother doing during that time?

R: Do you know, I don't really know. They had to go to court to get their house back. It was the 1940s and the government at the time were very much of the opinion that, I don't know, they didn't want to put out people who were renting. They didn't see why landlords should claim the house back. And they had to go to court. The lawyer of the person who didn't want to move out was very unpleasant and scathing and accused them of running away from the bombs, "Only too happy for Mrs whatever-her-name-was to have the house while you were running away from the war", which was a very cruel thing to say because, in fact, she had left before the war started and was nursing a dying daughter. So, it wasn't very pleasant. But the judge, in the end, found in their favour and they got the house back and that's when we all started living [together], and Aunt Lena, who's now one hundred, came to join us in the old family home, and it was those three women who brought me up really.

I: And how was that, being brought up by three women?

R: Well, I didn't know any different. I had male cousins and I used to love it when they came over. It was a funny time, though, the war was all around you. When television first started coming in a lot of the television programmes were all about soldiers, and the war, and the "Laffe" [Luftwaffe], and Vera Lynn, and the wartime songs, and it was all still going on. It was 1947 we moved there, so I'd have been six. So the war was very ... Yes, it was part of life still. I remember once walking along with Mummy, and it was the first time I was aware of Remembrance Sunday, and we were just walking along the road and she said, [We've now just got to stay still for a minute because it's eleven o'clock, and we just have to say a prayer for Daddy and all the other men that died, and this happens every year". I think I was about five or six when that happened, and I always sort of think of her on Remembrance Day. But having said that, she was always very aggravated by all the fuss and parading up Whitehall because she felt the war widows got an absolute bad deal. She used to say, "German war widows are treated as heroes' wives, whereas some of us actually couldn't afford to live". She managed, but she got letters occasionally from the tax people, asking if her father-in-law had given her any extra money, and she was absolutely livid. "Even if he had, so what? I gave you my husband!" So, she was quite cross about the way widows were treated.

I: Did she ever explain further? What was her opinion?

R: What, why she felt that?

I: What was her experience of it?

R: Well, I think probably because she was widowed when she was 28, my father died just before his 30th birthday, and I think she felt cheated, really. Part of me thinks, well it's his fault because he shouldn't have gone off because, actually, he had a job that was protected. He was in the bank. He could have stayed at home, but he felt it was his duty to go, and so when he thought that there was going to be a war, he joined the Territorial Army, and of course when the war broke out then he was called up. But he did have a

very promising career, and so I know that, apart from losing him, she also lost a different lifestyle from the one that she had. Obviously, she wanted a big family and she wanted to not have to watch her pennies. Now she realised that she was lucky to have a few pennies to have to watch and be able to spend, and she didn't have to go out to earn a living because she could just manage on the pension that she got from the war and from my father's work, I think. I think that's how she managed. But there was never a lot of money around. Not that I felt deprived, I didn't. The army paid for my education because in those days officers' children had to be privately educated. You couldn't go to an ordinary school.

I: How do you think other women saw military wives or military widows?

R: I don't know. I don't know. I can't comment on that. What do you mean, from the point of view that they were getting a pension?

I: What were the views of people who were married to men in the military, because they got benefits, did you feel there was a different attitude to people?

R: Not really. It might have been different if my father had been a career soldier, I don't know. I don't think it would have done. My father-in-law actually was a career soldier. I don't know, I can't comment on that really. I never came across any sort of comment. It was such a funny time. There were so many people who came back so badly maimed or psychologically damaged through it all that you felt lucky to be alive yourself, and my father always said, apparently, before he went, that he'd rather die than come back wounded or maimed, so he got his wish because he would have been paralysed if he'd come back. He got a bullet in the spine.

I: What was the sense of community? Was there a military community in those times?

R: No, no. Do you mean that Mummy might have been part of? No, not at all. Not at all. She had absolutely no connection with anybody. It probably would have been different if he had been a career soldier because I know my mother-in-law did an awful lot of work with the wives in her husband's battalion, but Mummy, as far as I know, never had any contact. The only contact she had was she got a letter from somebody once, and she used to have it, but I don't know what's happened to it because I haven't got it amongst the bits here. But his watch, his wristwatch and his fob watch – you know these big watches men used to have in their pockets, a pocket watch – was sent back, and he said that it was a bit battered because it had been through all sorts. He'd carried it with him throughout the war and was just returning it to Mummy. He gave her one piece of information which she didn't know: they used to call my father "Rock", apparently, because his initials were R O C K, so he was known as "Rock". And that's the only contact she had with any of them, and he was just a fellow officer who returned those things, otherwise it was just formal communications from the War Office.

I: And that's how she was informed about his death?

R: There must have been a letter first of all saying he was missing, presumed killed in action, and then eventually they got the information in 1945. I think 1945.

I: Was that in person or by letter?

R: Yeah, letters.

I: So there wasn't any person there to come 'round?

R: You see, I have a memory of her receiving a telephone call when I was at my grandad's house, and in my head it was always that this was the call that confirmed it, but I never knew whether it really was. Because she was crying and my mother didn't cry. So maybe it was, or maybe somebody reminded her of something. So, I mean that it would have been the right sort of time, that would have been in 19... No, I can't remember. No, it was all very cut and dried. The first info she got they had to correct. It was wrong because they gave her the date that he was wounded, and they thought that was the date of death, but it wasn't, in fact. It was quite a letter, apologising ... They'd had further information from the doctor who had attended him and the padre who had buried him, so she knew he'd been properly buried, and all the rest of it. I can show you those later.²⁶

I: Did she ever talk about that moment when she found out?

R: No. No. All she'd said was that she'd gradually realised that he wasn't going to come back and that, for her, that gradual realisation was a far better thing than to suddenly out of the blue to get the telegram, so that when the letter finally came, it just kind of confirmed her own gut feeling. But she always said there was no way she wanted to marry again. She wasn't looking for anybody else. She always used to say she didn't really know what married life was like because they just had a honeymoon really. She came home, she was sitting behind two women on the bus, and they were both having a good moan about their husbands: what this one's one had done, and what the other one's one had done, and she said she felt like tapping them on the shoulder and saying, "You thank God you've got them, however annoying they are". But she didn't, she'd probably have gotten a punch on the nose if she had. They were really brassed off! [Laughter.]

I: Where did they go on their honeymoon?

R: Well, I don't think they had a proper honeymoon. Well, they got married in early February 1940. I think it was 1940 they got married. And they didn't have a "floating down the aisle in a white frock" wedding. It was a suit and very much an austerity wartime wedding at the local Catholic church. I don't know at what point he got his commission. I have got one interesting thing: one of the letters he had sent because he had started off in the Queen Victoria Rifles, you know, when he was called up they stuck him down in Kent somewhere, and a Christmas card that he wrote to her from there which I scribbled all over when I was a small child. And there is a letter which he sent after he had left them and had got a commission in the Royal Norfolks, and he had heard that his former colleagues had been sent off to ... I don't know if it was D-Day or what it was ... but they were sent off to an attacking situation whereas in fact they hadn't been trained for any of it, and he was very, very angry and just says, "So, 1914, here we go again in 194—(whatever), to the everlasting disgrace of those in charge", so it's quite strongly ... I keep thinking I should send this to the [Imperial] War Museum. He was very upset by the fact that the people that he had trained with had been wiped out, and he would have been one of them if he hadn't gotten his commission.

I: Did your mother know any of his friends in the military?

R: No. There was none. It wasn't really the time for socialising.

I: Do you know much about his training? How long he was training for or what your mother might have thought about that?

²⁶ See Fig. 2.

R: Not a lot. I don't think she was wildly happy he was going off, but she understood that he needed to, that the men had to go to do what they all thought was their duty. All I know was that when he was in Kent, she was at home with her mother in Hounslow,²⁷ but then when he was up in Norfolk, when he was sent up there, she got digs up in Kings Lynn. She sort of followed him around a bit until it was clear that he was going to be sent away, and I think by then she was pregnant. I think then she moved down to Hertfordshire to live with his mother, and for some reason he was coming and going there, too. Perhaps he got some sort of extra leave then. It's a bit patchy. Memory is a bit patchy. I don't even know if she even said why he was around.

But she then started agitating to go to Ireland because she wanted to be there rather than at Brookman's Park when he was being sent off, and so there was a big conflag because he didn't want her to go because Aunty Frankie had TB [Tuberculosis], and he didn't want her to be at risk and me to be at risk. So in the end she was fretting so much that he said, "Right, well, go and see the doctor what-ever-his-name-is, and if he says it's alright I'll give you my blessing". So she went off on her bike and when she came back, he looked at her and said, "You don't have to tell me what the doctor said. It's written all over your face". So she went off to Ireland while he went back to training, whatever he was training at, and then that was when he came to Ireland. The morning I was born, in fact.

It was Sunday, and there was no transport. Have you ever arrived in Dun Laoghaire? If you look up on the hills, you may not have noticed, but there's a single chimney pot on one of them, and it's called Katty Gallagher, and he knew if he could get to Katty Gallagher that he just had to drop down the other side, and he'd get to The Scalp, and then he'd be able to walk into Enniskerry, which is what he did. So he did it all on foot. And when he got to Enniskerry, Gran said, "Ron, she's in Dublin, the baby has arrived". Apparently, he arrived at Holles Street Hospital, and the sister came in to Mummy and said, "Mrs King, there's a fine young man outside claiming to be your husband", and Mummy said, "Don't be silly. He's in England. He is in the army", and she said, "Well I wouldn't be sending him away if I were you. He's gorgeous!" Anyway, he walked in and that was it. She always used to say, "This is the spot", all through my childhood, every time we were on the bus from Dun Laoghaire or Bray or whatever, she'd say "This is the spot where Daddy crossed the road to get up to Katty Gallagher". It all looks a bit different now. Whenever I go back, I say which is the spot. All the houses have gone up and the roads have changed.

I: Did she ever talk about how they met?

R: They met because they were colleagues in the bank. They both worked for Westminster Bank, and they were at Kensington, just opposite Kensington Gardens, so that was why they used to stroll around Kensington Gardens. Apparently, in the early days he used to be driving around in a green little MG car. She thought, you know, he's got ginger hair and is driving this flash car, wasn't sure, but anyway in the end they hit it off.

I: Do you know much about their life before you came along?

R: No. I know he liked teasing her. She was terribly Irish at heart, my mother. She absolutely loved Ireland with a great passion, and she absolutely loved a singer called John McCormack, and she insisted that my father went with her once to the Royal Albert Hall where John McCormack was going to do a concert, and of course the place was packed full of people because he had a big following, and Mummy was sitting there thinking this was marvellous, and then John McCormack started singing a song, and there was a line

²⁷ Respondent correction: She was at home with her father, not her mother.

in it and the words were, "It's time I was moving. It's time I passed on", and, apparently, my father yelled out, "Hear, hear!" in a very loud voice, and my mother nearly died. She was mortified that he'd been so rude to her great hero, and he wasn't very impressed, but it was probably mainly to tease her rather than show disrespect for the great man. But he did like teasing her, he liked fooling about. Apparently, once he tipped my pram up because he was so busy fooling about and, luckily, I shot down under the apron rather than over the top, but he wasn't popular. So, she used to enjoy talking about it. She liked talking about it. And she always used to say ... You see, I was very like him. I had bright red hair when I was a child, and I did look like him even when I was an infant, and apparently one of her stories was he saw me the morning I was born, and he was there for a couple days, and then he had to go back, and then he came out again on embarkation leave for six weeks, but when he came back, apparently, she looked at him and said "You've changed", and he said "What do you mean I've changed?" "No, you've changed, something is ... You've changed". "Well what do you mean I've changed?" "Well your face is changed", and he said, "What do mean, my face has changed?", "Well, you ... I don't know ... You look coarse!" He said, "Don't be so silly. You've been looking at that little thing whose face is so like mine and because she's got this little delicate skin and everything you now think my face should have this little delicate skin". Anyway, that's another of her stories, that she accused him of being coarse. I was like him, and some of the reactions as I developed were very like him, so she always said I was his child rather than hers. She looked very different to me, she had very dark hair, quite an Irish face, really, grey-blue eyes put in with smutty fingers.

I: Did she talk about him more later on in her life?

R: She didn't believe in outwardly showing grief. She said you can't go through life crying, whatever happens, you know. You've have to make the best of what you've got. She was a very cheerful happy woman. But the bottom line was losing the man she loved at a very young age. You can't imagine it, really, can you? I mean, I grew up, you sort of took it for granted that this was where it was at, but you know I lost my man when he was 71, and I know what that was like, but we'd at least had our family together and all the rest of it, but Mum, you know, all her dreams were chopped at the root almost, but she still had a big spark of life, and she knew that life had to go on. And, of course, once I finally got myself married, which she was so disgusted about ... "When are you going to get married? You're not going to find a man made of chocolate who you can mould exactly to your wishes!" "When the right man comes, I'll marry!" Anyway, I did, thank god, find somebody whom she loved to bits, and when the grandchildren came along, she was a marvellous, marvellous granny. She didn't stand any nonsense but she was a marvellous granny. Sewed and made clothes, babysat, played cards, you name it, she did it. So in a way they were her ones she didn't have. Absolutely devoted to them. And they to her, I have to say.

I: Her life immediately after she found out ... Can you talk about what that entailed? Her benefits, how she was treated after that as a widow?

R: Well, I know she got a pension from, I suppose, from the War Office or Pensions Office, whoever it was who provided the pensions, and when I started school, they paid my school fees, and I don't know how all that was organised. And she also had a bit of a pension from the bank. Of course, she was taxed on everything. There was no waiving of tax of any sort, and there was one occasion on which, because she had been moving around and had been in Ireland for a while and then came back to England, whether it was to do with a change of address or something ... Anyway, the tax people found, quote unquote, her again and, anyway, suddenly at the end of a particular month she looked at her bank statement and a whole huge amount, I mean most of the money, had been removed to pay a tax bill. I don't quite know what had happened, but they had made an

assumption about her and her finances and just taken the money, which they were apparently entitled to do, and so she was in quite a bad way financially at the time and really had to have a big fight to put things right. She was livid, because she felt she'd not only given them her man but they were now trying to take all her money as well.

And it was after that that they were prying into all her details and wanting to know if her father-in-law had given her any money or if she'd received money from any other source. So, she was cross. I mean, she didn't have loads of money, but she had enough to live on, especially as she'd clubbed together now with her sister, who was earning, so they were sharing household expenses. It might have been different if they hadn't done that. I don't know enough about the nitty gritty of it to be able to give you any proper information because she never believed in talking to children about money.

I: She didn't remarry? You don't remember any other men in her life?

R: Gentleman callers? No.

I: You don't know if she ever took up with anybody?

R: No, she always said she was a one-guy gal. And, you know, it was a different world then. She was brought up as a good Catholic girl who didn't have sex before marriage. She believed that people should be chaste if they weren't married, so you know. Who knows. She certainly didn't discuss any of that with me, and I certainly wouldn't have asked her, you know. It's a private business, really, isn't it? But she had very strong views on that subject, and they were the traditional Catholic views.

I: Growing up, was there childhood friends who had fathers? Did you feel like you were missing out?

R: Oh yes. Yes, hugely. I felt I was missing out on having brothers and sisters. I would have loved to have had brothers and sisters. I felt I was really cheated of that. Yeah, it's a gap. It is a gap. It's a big gap in your life if you've got a significant part of your family that's missing. But I do feel very strongly that it is a very, very large gap.

I: Were you around other children who didn't have fathers, who were lost in the war?

R: Not a lot, surprisingly enough. I think there was just one other girl in my class. It's interesting, isn't it, because you'd have thought there'd have been more. There was only one other in my class whose father had been killed. It wasn't anything that was ever discussed, you know. You just took it for granted that that's the way it was.

I: How do you think they treated people who came back disabled because of the war? Is it different then to the way it is now?

R: I don't know. I think the difference is now that people are more willing to accept that people are damaged by these experiences, by the experience of war, and that the people who are damaged have nothing to be ashamed of by being damaged. It's more open, I think. The whole society lets much more hang out now. I might argue too much hangs out, but you know. You're expected to weep at every turn, whereas we weren't allowed almost to cry. But there's no doubt about it that then it would be probably a sign of weakness. You'd be a bit of a sissy, especially a man, you know, if a man broke down because his nerves were shot, it would be unthinkable. So, I think from that point of view I think the guys now, if they're damaged, probably have a better deal than hitherto, but I don't know. I don't know anybody in that situation. I just get the feeling from the general way it's talked about now and, you know, all the stories of people coming back from

World War 2, so changed and so damaged that their wives couldn't live with them anymore, and you'd meet people in the streets sometimes whose faces were totally disfigured because maybe they'd been in the RAF and their planes had caught on fire, and so there was this awful plastic surgery they used to have, and their faces would be completely disfigured. Frightening to look at. Very, very scary. Like something out of a horror film. I suppose plastic surgery was sort of not as sophisticated then as it is now. They can do a better job, but imagine those men. Imagine if your man came back totally damaged. You couldn't even recognise him, and his personality had totally changed. It would be a hard ask, wouldn't it, to stay in the marriage. And yet, you know, the poor guy.

I: What was your sense of masculinity then? Were they more secure because they all went through the same thing or was it more fractured?

R: I think there probably was a certain amount of solidarity because they all went through it together. The ones who'd have been out on a limb would have been the conscientious objectors. They'd have been thought of as big sissies, cowardly and whatever. The whole atmosphere was that you fought for king and country, and you were doing your duty as a man, and that was what you had to do. There was certainly no talk of women being in the front line then.

I: Is there any particular instances stand out for that time? When you're thinking of being a child at that time?

R: The reason I mention the guy with the face ... I was coming home from school, I think it was dusk, and I came around a corner, and this guy was coming in the opposite direction. I knew instantly what had happened and what it was, but it had given me such a fright, and then I realised I was trying not to react. I was very scared, but I did realise what was the matter, and then I felt terrible because I had jumped because I realised that was the way he was because he was fighting for us. It was for us. There was very much a sense that these men did this for us. And that's gone now, of course.

I: Who were your male figures growing up?

R: I suppose my uncle, and I had three boy cousins, the parish priest, the doctor, various married friends of my mum, two or three of those. People in Ireland that I knew and used to see once a year, my old [great-]uncle, who used to shave once a week to go to Mass, and brothers of friends. There were a few chaps around.

I: None of them in the military or joined the military at all?

R: No. Not in my childhood, no. But later my cousins did, but that was later in the 50s and 60s. And, really, by that time you are one removed from it all.

I: So they weren't influenced at all to join the military because of the family?

R: No, not at all.

I: Can you explain the best you can the details of your father's death and what position he was in?

R: My understanding is that he was on a ship that was supposed to be going to India, but it was diverted, and I think it's because Pearl Harbour happened, but I can't be sure of that because of the dates, but he would have left in late September/ early October 1941, and then he was set sail then. And he was sent to Malaya, and there was a place called

Senggarang or something like that? There was the feeling that the Japanese were close, and nobody quite knew if they had landed or not. And, apparently, according to this fellow officer of my father's (I wish I still had the letter – I haven't), they were doing reccies to see whether there were any Japanese, and he led out a party to see if there were any of the enemy around, and a Japanese sniper got him in the spine. And he was carried back. The men carried him back, and he died of wounds. I thought he had been injured in December 1941, but looking at these letters again this morning, it seemed to say that he died in January. No, he died in February, but he'd have been injured in January. I don't want to make any noise because I will rustle and make noise on your machine, but you can look at them later, if you like. So that's all I know, really. He was attended, he was brought back, we knew he'd been shot in the spine. He was attended by the doctor, he was attended by the padre, and he was buried.

Mummy used to say when she died she'd like her ashes to be taken out and put in the grave with him. I thought "What?". I said, "They probably wouldn't let you anyway, and I don't want to do that", There was an offer at one point where they would take people out to visit their husband's grave. They would actually pay for their fare? Do you remember there was some scheme? Anyway, she would never do it. She felt it would be too much, emotionally. It would cut her up far too much, and so she never did it. So, I said I would go before I died. So we did.

I: So you visited, but she never visited while she was alive?

R: No. Paul and I, when our Patrick was in Japan, we thought, "Right, we'll do this big Far Eastern trip", so we went to Singapore first and found my dad's grave and then to Manilla to stay with an old school friend of mine, and then we went to Japan.

I: What was the place of burial like? Was it a monument?

R: It's a big military cemetery in Changi in Singapore.²⁸ Fantastic. I did know where I was going. I had the details printed out, of the grave, and the grave number, and the row and whatever. When you go in there, they've got this big fancy entrance. In the wall where you go in, almost like a tabernacle or something, a little cubbyhole in the wall and you can open it, and you can get out a book, and they have the list of everybody who is buried there. It's manicured within an inch. The grass is cut within an inch of its life. It is so beautiful. The lines are straight, and all the graves are beautiful, and each grave has its own flowering shrub. It's beautiful. So, I found his grave. Quite a lot of graves with "Soldier known only to God". Just so sad they had the body, but no name. Then they had loads, right at the back, almost like a big pergola, I don't know how many walls, with a roof over the top, but open at each side, and each side of the wall names of all the people who had been lost. They had no bodies. They just had names. Incredible. Loads of Indians, Singhs, loads and loads, Commonwealth names, quite horrifying, but wonderful to see it all commemorated. They've done a beautiful job out there. I mean, I haven't been to any of the war graves in France, so I haven't seen what they're like, but this was quite spectacular, really. Quite moving.

I: How did that make you feel?

R: A bit choked up. I had a little bit of a weep.

I: Your husband, did he have any knowledge of the military? What was his reaction?

²⁸ Respondent correction: the cemetery was in Kranji, not Changi.

R: Well, I mean he came to support me. He came from an army family. His father was career army. He was Commanding Officer of a battalion that went in at Arnhem, and he was a prisoner of war after that. He was captured at Arnhem. So he was a career soldier. So Paul was brought up in a military family, really, but he'd been at boarding school here all his life because, in the early days particularly, they didn't pay for kids to fly halfway around the world. So his mother was a CO's wife.

I: So did your mother meet his parents?

R: Oh yes.

I: How was that relationship as a military family?

R: It was fine. Nobody thought that much about it, really. I mean it would have been different if Daddy had been [a] career [soldier], but it's a different kettle of fish really, isn't it. But they got on perfectly well.

I: So, other extended family members ... What was their experience of your mother's loss?

R: Well, I suppose the people who were most affected by it were of course her own mother, and her sister, my aunty, Aunty Lena, because they were the ones who sort of were with ... Well, Lena wasn't with her, but Gran was with her, but they were the ones who decided to make a life together after they got the house back in Hounslow. But it was particularly my gran because she and Mum travelled around with me. It wasn't until they got that house back that the three of them got together again. Apparently, I was quite sniffy about Aunty Lena at the beginning. "Who is this woman coming in who I don't really know very well?" So they'd had a fearful time because in February '41 – that was when Mummy was expecting me, and Daddy was in Norfolk, I don't know where Mummy was, probably in Norfolk as well – their father, Mummy's father, was killed in a car crash, but my gran was nursing daughter number two in Ireland at the time, so couldn't get back for the funeral. So that was their first death, and then I was born in the August, and then Aunty Frankie died in the October, and my father died following February, so it was a bit of a difficult, quote unquote, time. There was a lot of grief around, but they all supported each other. What can you do? You've got to get on. My gran used to say to me, "Darling, you were the one who kept me alive" because of course my nappy needed changing whether they were sad or not.

I: How was it explained to you as a child about grief or death?

R: Just that Daddy had died in the war. I do remember once being in the garden with Mummy, and saying, "Oh it's really not fair. God took my daddy away, and I couldn't have any brothers and sisters because of that", and Mummy saying, "Well, I expect God will make it up to you when you grow up. You can get married and have some children of your own", "How do I know I'm not going to marry a drunken man?" That was my greatest fear because I'd seen so many drunken men coming out of the pub in Ireland. I remember saying that to the Reverend Mother, and she said, "There's plenty of drunken men in England you know!" She was Irish. I grew up in a very, very Catholic family, so God was in everything and, really, God helped all those people, whatever one's perception of God is. They were helped by their belief and, I think, probably you cling to that as best you can, and you lose it and try and find it again.

I: What was the culture of drinking at that time?

R: I think there's probably an awful lot more now. It's just when I was a small child I used to be absolutely disgusted by the smell walking past the pub, and I used to be rather frightened if a man came out drunk. I don't know why I latched onto this possibility that I might suddenly find that I might end up with one of these, but when you're a child you don't really know how it works, do you? And why did I never get this feeling here? Well, I think, I never walked past a pub where we lived. Well, there was one at the top of the road, but we never walked close enough to have this smell oozing out of it. It's changed. Ireland has changed. But 1940s Ireland, and parts of London ... I remember hating going to Mass in the church in Hammersmith because of the smell, and it wasn't a stench smell. It was the pub and the smoke, and really, I think, now looking back, the feeling of poverty. I think it's the rather stale clothes, the beer. I might be exaggerating a bit there. The Ireland that you know now isn't the same.

I: Any other sorts of memories that are relevant to the story of widowhood?

R: Because we haven't got conscription now, the people who go into the military are people who, for whatever reason, want to be there, and their families are sort of almost an appendage to that, and probably there is much more of a community spirit. It's like being in an organisation which maybe transfers from place to place. I'm thinking, really, in terms of the Foreign Office. You've got little enclaves of people who belong to the same organisation, who find themselves at a particular place and, therefore, socialise or not, but who are still part of a particular group, and I would think that now, because people aren't just being called up willy-nilly from here or there or everywhere, people make more of a life within a regiment. Am I talking rubbish?

I think from my mother's point of view it was quite different because he had just been a bank clerk who decided he really ought to go off and fight. Because it was the wartime and there was a purpose to what they were doing. It wasn't a job that could be left to one side for the evening and have a bit of socialising. I mean there must have been a bit of socialising, I suppose, but certainly nothing I knew about or that my mother ever talked about. And after he came back [when he didn't come back], there was no connection at all, apart from coughing up for the fees and the pension. There was no phone call to say "Are you alright Mrs King?" I think she wouldn't have expected it. She would have dropped dead if it had happened, I'd have thought. There weren't expectations. They didn't expect it, but it was just after the event when she used to grumble away when she'd hear the war widows in Germany were living a life of luxury in Germany, and she felt, "Ahem, excuse me!".

I: Was your mother a member of the War Widows' Association?

R: Yes. I was working at that time for the Jesuits in Farm Street, and they'd had a fundraising thing, and I was in the office doing letters. And there was a particular time of the year when we were very busy. We had to send out and stuff lots of envelopes, and my mother was doing bits of temporary work here and there, and we'd had all sorts of disasters with people coming in and not doing a good job, and I said to my boss, "Look, Mummy is available. She won't be a disaster. She'll come in and do the job". So she came in, and we were both working away, and it was a routine envelope-stuffing job, and we were listening to the radio, and they were interviewing Mrs Jill Gee, who had just started the War Widows' Association, and Mummy said, "That is a good idea. I'm going to join". So, she joined, but she didn't want to go and do anything. She just wanted to pay her dues, and she just kept an eye on what they were doing, and she used to enjoy watching, and when she died I then became an Associate Member, which is why they send me *Courage*, and that's where I saw your advertisement.



Fig. 1: Denise Haddon with a photograph of her parents. 5 April 2017.

Tel. No. Stoneycroft 2680

Any further communication on
this subject should be addressed
to:—

The Under Secretary of State
(as opposite).

and the following number quoted

Our Ref./ MOS/829/K.

Your Ref./ _____



THE WAR OFFICE,
EDGE LANE,
LIVERPOOL, 7.

23rd
February, 1946.

Madam,

With reference to War Office letter of the 18th December, 1945, regarding your husband 2nd Lieutenant R.O.C. King, The Royal Norfolk Regiment, I am directed to inform you that further information has recently been received from the medical officer who attended to your husband after he had been wounded and from the chaplain who buried him which leaves no doubt that Lieutenant King died of wounds on the 5th February, 1942, and not on the 26th January, 1942, as previously reported.

It is, therefore, now being officially recorded that 2nd Lieutenant R.O.C. King, The Royal Norfolk Regiment, died of wounds on the 5th February, 1942.

I am to express great regret that the information given to you on the 18th December, 1945, was incorrect. It was, however, based on the evidence available at the time. It is now clear that the date previously given was that on which he was wounded.

I am to convey to you an expression of the Department's sincere sympathy in your sad loss.

I am, Madam,
Your obedient Servant,

Mrs. E.M. King,
Glencot,
Enniskerry,
County Wicklow,
Ire.

E.S. King

Fig. 2: Letter from the War Office confirming the correct circumstances of Ron King's death. 23 February 1946.



Fig. 3: Denise's mother and father, Elizabeth Mary Cooper and Ronald Oliver Clayton King, on their wedding day. 24th February 1940.



Fig. 4: Ron King's first grave at Changi cemetery. His body was later reinterred at Kranji Military Cemetery in Singapore in 1946.



War Widows' Stories

History. Memories. Heritage.

An Interview with Brenda Hillman

13 May 2017

Conducted by Nadine Muller



The War Widows'
Association
of Great Britain



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To do so, and for any other questions about this interview, how you may use it, or about the project, please contact Dr Nadine Muller via email (info@warwidowsstories.org.uk), or by post at the following addressing: John Foster Building, Liverpool John Moores University, 80-98 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, L3 5UZ.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

I = Interviewer

R = Respondent / Interviewee

[] = Clarification note

I: So, today's the 13th May 2017.

R: It is.

I: Could you tell me your full name, please?

R: Brenda Marjorie Hillman.

I: And your age, Brenda?

R: 87.

I: Thank you. Do you want to start by telling me something about your childhood, where you were born, where you grew up?

R: I was born in Edenbridge and spent most of my life here. I went away to teacher training college when I was eighteen and then came back to the area and taught locally for four years. When I was ten, my father was killed during an air raid. He had gone to register for National Service, but was told because he was a builder that he would be more useful staying at home. He was working on construction at the airfield at West Malling when the airfield was shot up, and he died. So, that left my mother with three children to look after.

I: Can I take you back a little bit, Brenda? Tell me something about where you went to school. Do you have siblings?

R: Yes, I have a brother who is eighteen months younger than I, and a sister who is three years younger. I went to primary school in Edenbridge and then, at eleven, I went to Tonbridge Girls Grammar School.

I: What was that like?

R: What? Tonbridge Girls Grammar School? Well, that was a great adventure, really. We had to go every day on a train, and there were all sorts of opportunities there that I wouldn't have had locally, so it was a good experience.

I: What kind of opportunities?

R: Well, opportunities for languages, and more complicated science, and a broader curriculum, really. And sport. Yes, it was a good place to be.

I: Anything you particularly enjoyed?

R: I think I enjoyed all of it, really. Yes, it's a long time ago. [Laughter.] I have very fond memories of the place. Well, it was during the war years and, of course, there were lots of air raids and things happening while we were to-ing and fro-ing to school and while we were at school, so that made a bit of difference to the way that things went.

I: What was that like? Do you remember much of that?

R: There were air raid shelters underground, which were, essentially, a long list of narrow tunnels with seats on each side. Every now and then we had to go down there and work down there, and sometimes it would be lunchtime and we'd still be down there, so you'd get plates of food passed along from one to the other, which we all thought was great fun.

I: So, you weren't particularly scared or anything?

R: I don't think so. I think we were probably too silly to be scared. That was the thing with it. There came a time when they decided to evacuate children from the school to the West Country because of the doodlebugs and things, then. We had a silly state of affairs where, at the beginning of the war, children were evacuated here from London for safety, and then as time went on people were evacuated from here. My brother and sister went with their school, but I stayed with my mum.

I: How come?

R: What would I have been by then? Fourteen, fifteen. And I think I felt a bit responsible for her, really, probably. Because my dad had been killed by enemy action she was awarded a War Widows' Pension which was ... You had to collect it from the post office, and I can remember that it was £2 and 3/4 a week, which was supposed to keep us all going. As I said, my father had been a builder, and he had built our family home, which, while it was a four-bedroomed house with quite a big garden, that was a bit of a challenge for her to keep it going, and so she needed to look for a way to supplement the income. Luckily, my grandparents lived locally and they were both retired, so they were able to keep an eye on us when necessary.

And a friend of my mother had a husband who had been in the army in the First World War, and he was recalled and he was an insurance agent. Now, the insurance agents in those days went from house to house collecting weekly premiums or fortnightly premiums from people, and he covered the town and the villages around. So when he went off to the Army, his wife and my mother between them covered his round. His wife was older than my mum, and she didn't ride a bike, but my mum rode a bike, so she was given the outlying areas to cover, and Hilda covered the places that she could walk to, and they managed between them. Then, at some stage, my mother got an autocycle. Now, an autocycle was like a sort of slightly heavier bike, but it had a little petrol engine that would drive it around, and so she used to drive around the villages on this autocycle. That was okay, except if there was an air raid. One day she came home slightly dishevelled because they'd been an air raid and a V-Bomber thing going over, and she'd thrown herself in a ditch to be safe [laughter], and came home after that.

But I don't remember her getting much in the way of help. I can remember the vicar coming to visit her after my dad had died to say that, if she wanted him to, he would try to get my brother a place at Christ's Hospital boarding school which ... Have you come across Christ's Hospital? There's a boarding school near Horsham, and there are free places at it for various types of people with special needs sort of thing. It's famous for the school uniform there being black cassocks and yellow knee stockings, and our local curate's son went there, and he used to come home in the holidays with his black cassock and yellow knee stockings. I think my brother decided he wouldn't want to be wearing that anyway and my mother declined the offer, in any case.

I: Do you know anything about your parents' relationship? When they met, got married?

R: Yes.

I: Did your mother tell you anything about that?

R: Yes. They both lived locally. If you go over the fence there, and beyond the school, there's a row of houses facing this way, and then a little bit further down the road there's a row of houses facing the other way, so their back gardens back onto each other. So, they didn't have to go very far to meet because they were living in the same place. They married locally, and they married in 1928.

I: What was life like for you and your family before?

R: What? Before my father died?

I: Yes.

R: It was very comfortable, yes. We had a happy childhood and a nice big garden and family around. It was good. My father was from a large family. A family of eight, and there were three in my mother's, so there were aunts and uncles and cousins around, which was good.

I: And you were quite close because you all lived locally?

R: Yes. Most of us lived locally, yes.

I: And then you said that your father volunteered, but he was turned down?

R: Yes. Well, I think I remember it rightly. Every now and then there was an announcement that a certain age group of men had to register for National Service. So, you all had to report to wherever, but if you were in what I think they called a "reserved occupation", if you were doing something that was valuable to the civilian population then you weren't drafted into the Forces. You stayed at home and carried on doing whatever it was you were doing. So, it was a silly situation where lots of my mother's friends waved goodbye to their husbands, and they went off, and my father stayed at home, but then most of my mother's friends' husbands came home from whatever they were doing on the battlefield and my dad didn't. So, it must have been an awful ... a double shock for my mother when he was killed, in that she would have been thinking that he would have been relatively safe. So, it ...

I: So, your father didn't join up—

R: No.

I: — because he was deemed to be more valuable at home, doing the work that he could do as a builder?

R: Yes.

I: **Do you remember the day when he passed away?**

R: Yes, I do. As I said, he was working at West Malling airfield, and we lived, at that time, up by the other station, and the routine was that he would catch a train to Tonbridge, and at Tonbridge Station a bus would collect him and the other people who were working on the airfield, and take them there. They worked on Saturdays because the work needed to be done, and so he went off to work on the Saturday, and then mid-way through the morning a policeman came to the door, and also a telegram came, and the telegram said, "Your husband has been seriously injured, and you should get to the hospital as quickly as possible". So, my grandparents came up to look after us, and my mother went off. I don't know how she got there, but she got to the hospital shortly before he died, and then she came back and said, "Daddy's not coming home anymore". That was it.

I: **When was this?**

R: August 1940. August 10th.

I: **So it was quite early on in the war, wasn't it?**

R: Yes, and one of my father's sisters took the three of us to stay with her. She lived at Hever, which is about four miles away, and we stayed there until after the funeral, and then came back and carried on.

I: **What was your mother like when she came home and told you that Daddy wasn't coming home?**

R: Well, she was distressed, yes.

I: **Do you remember how you reacted? How old were you?**

R: I was ten, and my grandma said, "You're the oldest, so you must be very brave and help Mummy look after John and Shirley". [Laughter]. That was it.

I: **What did you think?**

R: Well, I thought that's the way it's going to be, and you have to just get on with it.

I: **So, you and your siblings didn't go to the funeral?**

R: No, no.

I: **And you came back home after the funeral, and you said you just carried on. How were things for your mother?**

R: Well, I suppose they must have been very difficult because she had to adjust to being on her own and to not having a wage coming in. I don't know how she coped, really,

because there was no such thing as counselling then. It was happening all over the place and you just got on with it.

I: How do you remember her, during those early days after your father died?

R: Well, she was just Mum, and doing things. Life wasn't simple in lots of ways. There was rationing, and there was danger, and at the same time you just had to keep your household going.

I: So, there were lots of other things to think about next to the grief?

R: Yes. Food was rationed, and clothes were rationed. It was a bit of a challenging time.

I: Do you ever remember seeing your mother cry, or angry? Did you get any sense of her feelings about the situation?

R: I don't think she would have shown us. I think it would have been "stiff upper lip" and carry on.

I: You said she went to collect her War Widows' Pension at the post office?

R: Yes.

I: Was that automatic? Did she have to do anything to get that pension?

R: I don't know.

I: But she got it?

R: She got it.

I: And, of course, it would have been heavily taxed. 50%, I think.

R: I don't know if it was enough to be taxed at that figure. I can't imagine that it would, would it?

I: 50%. It was classed as unearned income.

R: Oh, right.

I: As a benefit, and a compensation.

R: I can't remember that bit of it.

I: But it clearly wasn't much?

R: It wasn't much. Compared to what my father had been earning, it wasn't much.

I: And there were three children?

R: There were three children, and all the things that he would have done, like gardening and do-it-yourself jobs and that sort of thing, somebody had to be paid to do that. So, it can't have been easy for her.

I: How did you cope as a family, financially?

R: I don't know how she coped, no. I mean, I wasn't old enough for her to worry me with financial problems and that sort of thing, but it wasn't easy, and they were very strict about stopping the child allowance element of it when you got to a certain age. I remember getting cross about that because I stayed on at school until I was eighteen and then went to college, so I didn't actually earn any money until I was twenty, or about twenty.

I: Did you ever feel that it was financially a hard time?

R: Oh, yes.

I: Did you feel that you were missing out on things?

R: I was aware that every penny counted. In a way, because of things like rationing, you couldn't necessarily splurge out on things the way you can these days. You couldn't splurge out on clothes because you could only have whatever you'd got coupons to cover. So, it probably wasn't such a problem as it would have been without those restrictions.

I: How did you feel during those years when your father had died and you were growing up without him?

R: I missed having a father, and when other people's fathers were demobbed and came back, I missed it, then. I was very lucky in that my grandfather was a lovely man, and so we had him around, but it wasn't quite the same as having your dad. And my grandfather was asthmatic, so there were limits as to what he could do physically. But we came through. We got there in the end.

I: Would you say that you felt ... angry, sad?

R: Sad. I felt sad for my mother when people started being demobbed. I think that was a difficult time as well, but luckily she went on to re-marry in 1959 and had some happy years with a very nice man.

I: You said she went and got a job after your father died?

R: Yes.

I: Can you tell me a bit more about that, I know you already said—

R: Well, it was this collecting insurance business, and I think three days a week she went off on her travels around various villages and called at houses and collected sixpence, or a shilling or whatever, for these insurance premiums. She would then come home and do the books and get that sorted out, and then once a week she had to go to the head office ... not the head office, to the office of the Pearl Insurance Company in Tonbridge ... to take the money and pay that in and do whatever had got to be done in the way of things, and that was the way it went.

I: And she took that work to make sure there was enough, in addition to the War Widows' Pension which wouldn't have covered—

R: It wouldn't have covered the expenses, no.

I: So, your mother got the job with the insurance company to supplement the pension that she got. How did she find it?

R: How did she find the job, or what did she make of it?

I: **Both?**

R: Well, as I told you, she found it because her friend's husband went off to the war, and they shared his work between them. I think she found it very hard at times, especially in the winter weather. It's a bit hilly around here, so cycling around in the hills wasn't easy, but she did it because it had to be done.

I: **You said you mother, and you, and your siblings had support from your grandparents and family. Did you ever get any sense of how the community reacted to your mother being widowed?**

R: I think they were sympathetic people, yes.

I: **Do you remember the end of the war?**

R: Yes.

I: **How old were you?**

R: Fifteen. It was a great day.

I: **Can you tell me a bit about it?**

R: Well, there was an announcement on the radio and a great feeling of relief, and in due course there was a celebration parade and that sort of thing, and I think everyone thought life would be wonderful, but it got more difficult in many ways. Rationing continued and there were all sorts of adjustments to be made, and it was ...

I: **Did you celebrate that day?**

R: I don't remember. I usually remember when it comes to May 8th. I usually remember that that's the day the war ended, in Europe anyway. So, I suppose it made its mark on me.

I: **Did your mother later on ever talk to you about what it was like for her when your father died?**

R: No, no.

I: **Did you ever ask her?**

R: No, I didn't. No. You just accepted that was the way things were. There we are, but it meant that when my husband was killed then I had some appreciation that life was not going to be very easy.

I: **When did you marry?**

R: I married in 1955.

I: **And how did you meet your husband?**

R: As I told you before, I had been teaching locally, and I had a job at the school at Hever, which was a lovely job but I realised that I needed to make a change. I was going to

get buried in the job if I didn't move, and I would have found it difficult to find an equally happy school locally, I think. And my brother was in the navy and he'd been travelling all over the world, and travel was a bit difficult at that time so I thought I would apply to teach in service schools because the army and the navy had schools all over the place, and I rather fancied going to Malta or Ceylon. So, I applied to the navy and applied to the army for jobs in their schools and went for interviews and they said, "We'll let you know." In due course, I heard back from the army who said that they would offer me a job in Germany. I heard nothing from the navy until after the acceptance date for the army thing. So, I said, "Yes" and two days later the navy said, "We can offer you a job." But by that time... so I went off to teach in Germany in British Families Schools and was sent to an RAF station and Terry was a pilot on the station and we met there.

I: Which station was it?

R: That was at Brüggen, which was near Mönchen-Gladbach. So that was that, and in due course we married.

I: And your mother remarried?

R: My mother remarried in 1959.

I: How did she meet her second husband?

R: He and his wife lived locally, and their son and daughter were roughly our ages. They were people we'd known for a long time, and they lived not far from us. His first wife died young, and then they got together. You know, they were people who had been part of our lives for a long time, so it all worked well.

I: So, they were happy. It was a happy marriage?

R: Yes, yes, yes.

I: How did you feel when you found out?

R: I was very pleased for her, and he was a lovely step-father. He really was a lovely man, so we were lucky with him.

I: And, of course, you said earlier that even when you were younger, you had a feeling that you had a duty to your mother, to look after her, I suppose?

R: Yes, give her support, sort of thing, yes.

I: Did that carry on?

R: Not in the same way. No, I mean, as they got older and more needy then it came into action again, but not in the early days.

I: So, what happened to your husband?

R: Well, he was a pilot. When we first met he was flying what were, then, fast jets, in those days, and then he switched onto Comets, and in due course our son was born. He was on a Short Service Commission in the RAF and the Comet flights used to take him away from home for quite a long time because they used to stage flights out to Australia, and some across to Christmas Island as well. After our son was born, he didn't like being away from home very much, and there came an opportunity to transfer

to helicopters. He thought that would be a good idea because helicopters didn't fly at night, then, and things, so he switched to helicopters, and we were posted out to Malaya. He went off on a flight, and the helicopter broke up and crashed, and he was killed. So, that was that. I was out there, our son was eighteen months old then, so I then had to pack up and come home and sort out a life.

I: So, you were a service widow, not a war widow?

R: Yes, well, classed as a war widow. I get a War Widows' Pension.

I: Oh, okay. Sorry.

R: Because they were on active service out there at the time, during the ... Well, it was the tail end of the emergency, that was it. Again, we had been living in rented accommodation over here, and so I had no base to come back to, and my sister and her husband said, "Well, you must come and stay with us". Because it's odd the way things happen, but my mother had carried on in the family home for years and years after we had all left home and gone, but eventually she decided it was too big, and she would move to something smaller. She had sold the house and moved into a flat while she was waiting for a bungalow to be built, so she couldn't have us. But my sister and her husband did, and we stayed with them.

The local people knew what had happened and my sister and her husband had a son who was six months younger than my son, and the managers of the school at Marsh Green happened to have a managers' meeting at this time. They knew me, and they knew my mother, and the secretary wrote to my mother and said, "Terribly sorry to hear about what has happened. If Brenda decides that she'd like to get back into teaching, we're going to need somebody at the school in September. It'll be a part-time job, and it may not last very long because we think the school may close soon, but tell her to let us know if she's interested". My sister said, "Well, if you want to do it, I can look after the boys while you go and do that". So, I thought, that was a stop gap, and again, by that time, I realised that the pension I was going to get wasn't going to be all that generous.

I: So, you were saying that you decided to take that part-time teaching job.

R: To take the job, yes, because I was going to need to supplement the pension and do something about housing, and that sort of thing. So, I did. I used to go off on my bike and cycle a couple of miles down to the school. I did four-and-a-half days there, instead of five. That was the part-time element of it. But after the first year, they decided they could afford the extra half-day, so I stayed on. I was very lucky in that, well, the first year there was a lady there who was the head teacher. It was just a little village school with two or three teachers at any time, and then she left and a young man came as head, who had got all sorts of different ideas, which made life more interesting. Then after two or three years he went off, and another young man came with more ideas, which was interesting.

So, I was able to stay in the same job and get lots of different experiences there. And then I took over as head for a year while he went off on a course. That's right. By this time, my son was getting older and needing more time, so I just did the acting headship for a year and someone else came. Then, after a while, he went off and I was offered the headship so I stayed on until I retired. So, I was very lucky in that respect, in that I had a job which was convenient and would work with childcare and other responsibilities. In due course, we moved into a flat for a while which we rented, and then I was able to buy a flat of our own and then later on moved here.

I: I know you said you got your War Widows' Pension when your husband died. Did you get any help with re-locating back to Britain?

R: No, no.

I: You just had to organise—

R: Just had to organise it myself. When the accident happened, the padre came to tell me about it. Luckily for me, before we went to Malaya, we had had a flat in part of a house in Wootton Bassett, and another RAF couple had a flat in a different part of the house, and we became great friends because we had our babies at about the same time, and that was the way things worked. He was posted out to Kuala Lumpur about six months before we went so when we arrived, they were there. When Terry was killed, I had been out shopping when the accident happened, and so when I got back and the padre was there, this friend was also there, because we were, at that stage, still in the transit hotel. We weren't in a quarter. So Marj said, "Come on, you must come and stay with us". So, they gathered me up with all our bits and pieces and took Graham and me back to their house, where we stayed until after the funeral. I had an interview with the station commander, who said, "Terribly sorry about all this. What are you going to do?" I said that I would go to my sister's, and he said, "Well, get in touch with the RAF Benevolent Fund. They will do something". But, although a retired chap who lived in Sevenoaks came to see me and made comforting noises, there wasn't much in the way of practical help until I wanted to buy the flat, and then I applied and I had an interest-free loan of £400 [laughter] which helped towards the deposit for the flat.

But, it's weird, you know. I realised I was quite lucky in that Marj and Brian were out in Malaya already, so I had support from them. The other weird thing that happened was that when we were on the way out to Malaya, we stopped off in Delhi, I think, and walking across the tarmac was one of the Comet pilots that we had known from Lyneham. He said, "What are you doing here?" and we said that we were off to Malaya. Well, then, when I was coming home after the funeral, we had to go down from Kuala Lumpur down to Singapore to wait for the flight home for ... I don't know whether we waited there for one day or two days ... but, anyway, while we were there in the lounge, this same chap came through who was on another flight between Australia and the UK, and he saw us there and said, "What are you doing here?" We explained to him what had happened and said we were waiting to go home in a Hastings. The Hastings were very noisy and slow things. Some of the Comet runs were what they called "CasEvac" runs, which meant they'd got nursing staff on board and, anyway, he said, "Oh, well, we can't have that. I'll sort something out". So, in fact, instead of having a very long and slow and uncomfortable [flight] home in a Hastings, we came home in the Comet, which was good because we were well looked after there. That was quite odd that, you know, there should have been that help around, so it wasn't that I didn't have help, but the help I had was from people that we knew and not official help.

I: And almost coincidental?

R: Yes, yes.

I: Did you get any other official help, apart from the loan and the War Widows' Pension?

R: No, no.

I: And it sounds like, as in your mother's day, when she lost her husband, there was still no grief counselling?

R: Oh, no. That hadn't been invented. No. The vicar came to see me. [Laughter.] I remember getting cross. When I saw the Commanding Officer out in Kuala Lumpur, I said, "Can you tell me what caused the accident?" He said, "No, we don't know at the moment, but we've got to find out quickly because the Duke of Edinburgh is coming out soon". I thought, "Well, blow the Duke of Edinburgh! I don't suppose he'll be going up in a helicopter anyway". Then, when the vicar came to visit, he said, "It's been a terribly sad time with your news and so-and-so has died and so-and-so has died". These were two local people who, to my mind, were very ancient, you know, and I couldn't feel terribly sorry about it. [Laughter.] But he, poor man, didn't really know what to say.

I: How old was your husband when the crash happened?

R: He was 26.

I: Very young.

R: It was very young, yes. We'd been married three-and-a-half years, so it was too soon. There we are.

I: You mentioned earlier, briefly, that you felt that perhaps you could understand your mother's situation a little bit more when your own husband passed away.

R: Well, I think what I meant was that I knew what I'd got to cope with, you know, that she had had to cope with being on her own and sorting things out, and I knew it probably wouldn't be easy.

I: How did you tell your son?

R: Well, he was only eighteen months old, and I don't know what I said, but he just grew up knowing there was only me, really.

I: Did you ever explain to him how his dad died?

R: Oh, yes, yes, yes. He knew that, but he was so little ...

I: How did you feel people reacted to you once you were a war widow?

R: They were very ... you know. Friends were very helpful and did their best to help when needed, and we had local friends who had no children of their own, and they were very supportive, and the husband was, well, he liked sailing and various other pursuits, so he included Graham in those sorts of things, so we had help in that respect. My brother was also helpful in many ways, but they had four children of their own, so he'd got plenty to do with his own without having an extra one to deal with.

I: How did you feel when you realised the amount of the War Widows' Pension that you were going to get?

R: I felt it was a challenge. I was glad that we'd got some savings. The thing that made me cross: Terry was on a Short Service Commission and, at the end of the Short Service Commission, you got a gratuity. I can't remember the exact figure now, whether it was £2000 or £4000, because it varied between an eight-year and a twelve-

year commission, I think, but whatever it was, it would have been enough to buy a house when you came out, and when I got the notice about the pension, there was no mention of this gratuity thing. So, I rang up somebody and said, "Why is this?" Whoever it was at the end of the phone said, "Oh, the gratuity is given to compensate for loss of earnings during the years that they might have been working as civilians". I said, "Well, what about to compensate for the loss of life?" He said, "No, that doesn't apply". At the time, I thought that was a pretty dreadful thing for anyone to say. It could have been better put.

I: So, you didn't even get part of the gratuity for the amount of time he had been out there?

R: No, no, no.

I: So, your War Widows' Pension wasn't enough to cover your living expenses for you and your son?

R: Well, I wouldn't have been able to buy a house or a flat or anything with it. It was only because I was working that I was able to do that.

I: How long after your husband's death was it that you took up the teaching position?

R: Well, he died in February, and I started teaching in September.

I: How did it feel going back to work?

R: It wasn't what I wanted to do. I didn't like leaving my child. I knew he was perfectly okay with my sister, but it meant that I missed great chunks of his growing up, but I was relieved to have a job.

I: How were things in that half-year before you started teaching again, when you lived with your sister?

R: A bit of a haze, really, when you look back. I think things happen to your brain when you get a catastrophe happening in your life, and things get to be a bit of a haze. We lived together happily, and everything was okay, but you just sort of had to adjust to things.

I: Did your son every ask after his father? Have you spoken much about his father to him?

R: I have done, and his father had a sister. He'd been quite close to her, and we used to keep in contact with my husband's mother when she was alive, so he had those sorts of contacts.

I: When you became a war widow there was, of course, no War Widows' Association yet?

R: No.

I: That was another decade or so later. Were you aware of any other war widows around you at the time?

R: No, no. Well, except ... Terry had done the helicopter course with, among other people, a chap called Ian, and Ian and his wife were posted out to Malaya at the same time as we were. Ian was killed a few months after Terry. I've forgotten exactly the date, but again his wife and their ... They had a little girl who's a bit older than Graham, but his wife came back to the UK with their child and was staying, for a while, with Ian's mum. At one point, she said, "How would it be if we got a house together?" We looked into that, but decided that it wasn't going to be feasible. But she was the only other war widow that I knew.

I: When the war widows started campaigning and organising around about 1970, 1971, were you aware of that?

R: No, no.

I: When did you become aware of the War Widows' Association?

R: When I was coming up to retirement. I had a book called *The Good Retirement Guide*, or something, and it was mentioned in there, and so I made contact around about that time, or after I'd retired, because when I was working I wasn't free to go to meetings and do things and all this stuff. But there was a woman who organised meetings at Kemsing, up near Sevenoaks, and she did it because she, again, her father had been killed in World War 2, and so her mother was a war widow, and her mother had organised things, meetings, and when her mother died, Kathleen had been helping her mother, so she carried on hosting the group up there for a while.

I: When was this? When did you retire, Brenda?

R: I retired in 1990.

I: So, you weren't aware that during the 1970s the tax on your pension was slowly coming down bit by bit?

R: Well, I think I was aware of that bit of it, yes. [Laughter.] But I used to get cross because of the tax and things. No, they certainly did some good work getting that sorted out.

I: Why did you feel cross?

R: Because I thought it was unfair that a benefit should be taxed like that, and I was paying tax on my earnings, as well.

I: Are you still involved with the [War Widows'] Association, now?

R: I am not as involved as I used to be. The local meetings that we had up near Sevenoaks, they came to an end when Kathleen became ill, and we now meet up three or four times a year for lunch in Tunbridge Wells, but I haven't been to any Annual General Meetings or anything like that for two or three years.

I: They tend to be all across the country.

R: They're all ... Yes, and I don't find travelling very easy these days.

I: Do you think the War Widows' Association still has a purpose?

R: I'm afraid so, yes.

I: Why is that?

R: Well, I think there's a need for people to have support.

I: What are the differences that you can see with your mother being a war widow, your own experience, and then maybe today's generation of war widows?

R: Well, certainly having the [War Widows'] Association has made a difference to the conditions for more recent war widows. As for the future, I think they're more conscious of what they can do, whereas I think, once upon a time, you just accepted that it was something that happened, and you had to get on with it. Whereas now people tend to be more proactive and vocal, and I think, generally speaking. The public is more aware, too, because they are much more visible.

I: Do you go to any of the Remembrance events? Have you done?

R: I have been, but again, not recently because I don't find standing for long periods very easy. Time catches up with you, I'm afraid. [Laughter.]

I: Brenda, I know you said you just kind of had to get on with it when your husband died, but can you think of the kinds of support you would have liked to have had at that time, looking back on it now? What kinds of things do you think would have been helpful to you?

R: I think it would have been helpful to have a dedicated guide. Someone who could steer you through things that had to be done, the legal things that had to be done, and practical things that had to be done, and certainly help with housing and basic needs.

I: And, as you've said, to a large extent, you were fortunate that you had your family around you. Your sister.

R: Yes.

I: And your other relatives.

R: Yes, I'd have been stuck without them. I don't think the council had any obligation to house you, then.

I: Do you think your husband knew what your situation would be like if he died? Do you think he would have thought you would be better looked after?

R: Yes, I think ... They used to pay a certain proportion of their salary into the [Royal Airforce] Benevolent Fund every month, and that was ... So the Benevolent Fund was there to look after people. But I don't think they realised the limits that there were on what could be done. When you're young, you tend to sort of, look at things through rose-coloured glasses, don't you, and think, "It'll never happen to me".

I: That's what a lot of women have said that we've interviewed so far. That you never think it will happen to you.

R: No.

I: You never think that you're going to be the one that's going to be a war widow.

R: No, and especially when, you know, when he was on the fast jets, and they were screaming around the sky, you used to hold your breath a bit, and then on the Comets. The Comets were lovely aircraft, but they'd had a history of mysterious crashes and things, and you thought, "Well, I hope they're alright". But you tended to think that helicopters would bumble safely around the sky, and then they didn't, and they had a terrible session out in Malaya with them, certainly, at that time.

I: **So, of course, at the time of your father's death, you said your mother, you certainly thought, in a way, because your father got rejected from service, he was asked to stay at home to do his work as a builder. You thought he was safer.**

R: Safe, yes.

I: **And then, in a similar way, I suppose you thought that the switch was a –**

R: Yes, I thought that ... yes.

I: **– safer option as he [your husband] moved on.**

R: Yes. It just shows how wrong you can be.



War Widows' Stories

History. Memories. Heritage.

An Interview with Wendy Hutchinson

28 April 2017

Conducted by Ailbhe McDaid



The War Widows'
Association
of Great Britain



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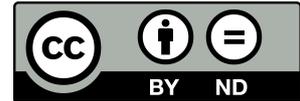


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To do so, and for any other questions about this interview, how you may use it, or about the project, please contact Dr Nadine Muller via email (info@warwidowsstories.org.uk), or by post at the following addressing: John Foster Building, Liverpool John Moores University, 80-98 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, L3 5UZ.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

I = Interviewer

R = Respondent / Interviewee

[] = Clarification note

I: It's the 28th April 2017. Conducting an interview for the War Widows' Stories project with Wendy Hutchinson with project representative Ailbhe McDaid. For the record, can you state your name please?

R: Wendy Hutchinson.

I: And your place of birth?

R: Folkestone, Kent.

I: That's great. Thanks, Wendy. Maybe we can begin by you telling us a little bit about your life, where you grew up, those kinds of things?

R: I was born in 1954 in Folkestone, Kent. I grew up there and lived there until I was about 18. My father worked for the Army, and after he came out of the Army, after the war, he was an engineer. So he worked civilian life because Shorncliffe Camp is near where we lived, which is an Army base.

I: Did you have brothers and sisters?

R: Yes, I had two sisters, two brothers, but my mother didn't have me until she was 39, so my oldest sister was married and had a baby before I was born. So yes, normal life. We weren't rich, but we had what we had.

I: And did you go to school in Kent?

R: Yes. I went to a little school near where we lived, and then I went on to Harcourt Girls' School because they had separate schools, then, girls and for boys. And then I stayed there until I finished, and then I went to work.

I: Can you tell us a little bit about your working life?

R: I started work in Woolworths, and then I moved on to a factory, Carter Wallace, that made Pearl Drops and deodorant, and I worked there. I was made supervisor, so I was in charge of quite a few girls, women. Until I met my first husband. Well I met him when I was 14 because he was in junior leaders, but we never got back again in touch with

each other until I was 18, 20. And then we got married, and I had a son and a daughter. He was from Scotland, so we moved back near Gretna Green for about a year, and then we moved back to Folkestone when my father died. It was about eight years or something, and then we fell apart and split up, so I had my son and my daughter on my own, and then I met Tony in 1987.

He was in the Army, he'd split up from his wife, and he had four children. We came to Wakefield because he was working at the time for the TA [Territorial Army, now Army Reserve] because he had the children to look after, and we got married on 1st April 1989. And then we had a son between us, so that made seven children. So, it was quite a busy life, and I'm not keen on children, but I didn't go anywhere, on any postings or anything with him. Well we moved to Tidworth, and then we moved to Warminster, with the seven children. He was in the School of Infantry, teaching signals. It made me laugh because when we moved to Warminster we then said we have to have a five-bedroomed house, and they didn't have any, and they were doing up some houses in the road, the Army, and they said, "Well, you can have two of them". And what made us laugh: they said "Well, we'll try to have them next door to each other". So my husband said, "We can't have the children down the road having a party while we're sat here". So we picked out two and they put a door in between, and we had a two-bedroom and three-bedroom house with the seven children. So it was quite hectic. He'd done about nine tours of Ireland in his career. He was in Germany for quite a few years. With his first marriage, he got posted to Gibraltar, so they had two years there, and then it split up when he was back in Germany then. But he did nine tours of Ireland and he was starting to get ill then. That was about 1980 ... 1990. He collapsed, and he thought he was dying, but they put that down to stress. He just said "I can't do it anymore. I can't do it anymore. I've got to get out", and they said, "But you're not well". But he wanted to get out, so he left in 1992.

I: He left the Army in 1992?

R: Yeah, he couldn't stick it anymore. At the time we didn't realise, I think it might have done him good to stay in, so they could put him in hospital, but at the time he just couldn't take it, so he left in 1992.

I: What kind of supports were made available, if any, during that time?

R: Before he left, or when he left?

I: During the process of leaving and subsequently?

R: Well, he collapsed and he thought he was dying of a heart attack, and they said it was stress. I think it was mainly because he did his last posting in Ireland in 1989, I think it was, and he was in a very stressful job then, directing the helicopters and all that. And I think it was just building and building, but we didn't realise at the time. So he didn't get any support then, I think that was because he was adamant he was coming out. The doctor who was examining him, he said, "Well, I'll put down (because you won't stay in because he was just ready for walking away) ... We'll put down that you're A-OK, but I'm not happy". But he wouldn't have it. So, they didn't give him any support then, and then he left, and then we came back to Wakefield, and that's when it all started building up.

We came back to Wakefield. He wasn't well at all. He did a course on being a domestic appliance repairer, which he did. He was quite good that way; could do anything. But it just started going wrong. He just kept collapsing, and the terror, and all ... well, he wouldn't talk about. Or he'd want me to lock him outside because he was scared he would hurt me. And my son, the youngest then, was only five, six, seven ... something

like that. And the other children were all grown up, and so most of them had moved away, so it was just really us and the youngest one at home. So, it started then, but we weren't sure what it was. The doctor put him through the mental health thing to see what it was, and he couldn't work out what it was. But he was drinking as well and I thought it was something to do with the drinking. When he was feeling funny, he drunk more. I could see a pattern. But he still tried to work because, well, he'd worked all his life. Because he joined when he was fourteen, 197—, so he did 22 years in service. So he tried working, but he'd be phoning me up saying, "Come here, come here", cause it was mainly washing machines, and he'd say I'm scared I'm going to hurt them, so I used have to drive out and sit outside, so we knew something seriously was going on. We went into the mainstream mental health [system], and they said right we'll let you talk to a psychologist. Have I gone too far?

I: No.

R: A psychologist. So he said yes. Of course, that was the worst mistake of his life because she started talking about childhood, saying something has happened to you when you were a child, and he was believing it, and I said, "Well, that's not right because he's got two sisters, three sisters, who live round here, because he was from Castleford and that's why we came back here". I said, "That's not right", because he couldn't understand what was happening, and she was putting it all onto his childhood. And it was just getting worse and worse, and then he collapsed. I can't remember whether the doctor or whether the psychiatrist said something about Combat Stress, so we were putting two and two together, and I was saying, "I think it might be something to do with your Army life". So, we got in touch with them, and they were very helpful. And they sent him to Alderley Court, which was for injured soldiers, and they, there at Alderley Court, diagnosed him and they said, "You've got Post Traumatic Stress Disorder". And that must have been about 1993 or '94 before someone actually said what you've got. So that's what we knew we were dealing with.

I: Could you just maybe talk a little bit more about how you accessed the services of the Army for the diagnosis and then the subsequent experience?

R: Well, as I say, we were going through the ordinary mental health [service], you know the National Health [Service], and we couldn't work out what it was. I knew it was something to do with the Army because he wouldn't talk a lot about his Army, and he was having dreams about the house getting blown up, not with him there, but with his family, and he couldn't take the noise of the children coming. They started having grandchildren, you know, a little baby, and he couldn't take that noise, and I couldn't work out ... And no one actually said then it could be to do with the Army, especially not the mental health thing. I mean, they might not have known about that then. I don't know, but no one said.

And then he kept collapsing, and I can't remember who it was, whether it was the doctor who he was seeing, the local GP or ... I think it was the GP. I don't think it was the mental health [professional] who was seeing him. He said, because he talked to Tony, he said, "Well what about finding out", and he must have heard about Combat Stress. I don't know whether he wrote to them, or he told us to do it and then they got in touch with him. So, it was more like the GP, this old GP we had who was quite good. So, they did get in touch with us, Combat Stress then, and I can't remember if they came out, but something happened because they said, "What about having a stay at Alderley Court?", which he did. So that was the first actual military connection that we made because it's hard to work out what it is. Afterwards, yes, but not at the time. So he went there. I run him there and picked him up and brought him home. So he had two weeks there and he'd come home and he knew what was wrong with him. Talking to other men, as well, same symptoms. And he knew, he said, "That's what's wrong with me," and I think he was

embarrassed about it to be honest because men don't like to think that there's a weakness, you know, because he did quite good jobs in the Army, and he got up to Colour Sergeant so there wasn't, ... So I think there was embarrassment about it.

I: So that was the initial diagnosis and the first stay. Can you talk a little bit about after the diagnosis? How did things progress?

R: Well, that was, say, 1994. I can't remember exactly. He tried working for himself, because I said to him, "Instead of working for a company, if you work for yourself, if you're not well, you haven't got to go in", so we tried that, but he couldn't even do that. I mean, he'd go to job and if there was a man working on the roof, he'd think that they were watching him. So he'd go, with his toolboxes, go around the back, and I mean we used to laugh. You still always got the laughter with military men. They would laugh about anything. And he climbed over the wall with his toolbox. She didn't even have a gate and he knocked on her back door, and she opened it. He'd gone over the back. It's weird because he knew what he was doing, but he couldn't stop it. It was still in his head that he was being watched. And in the end, he just couldn't keep it up. It was just ... collapsing, and building up, gradually building up.

I: During that time, did he receive a disability allowance?

R: No. Then, when he'd stopped working, I said, "Well, you can't stop working". I said, "Let's put in for a living disability allowance. We had a mortgage and everything then. I tried working, but every time I'd get a job, he'd get ill, and he'd be phoning me up in tears, and I was having to leave. And I said, "It's not fair that I'm not working. I should be working and not keep running home". And I think my son was noticing it more. He was only six or seven, you know, and he was noticing it more. I had a daughter nip round, she still does. It was my daughter, not Tony's, because his daughters were living in Scotland with his ex-wife, near his ex-wife. But she said there's something going on, something not right. And I said, "Well you're going to have to go on benefits", and that broke his heart the most. And I said, "You're going to have to. We can't survive without it". So we went for living disability allowance, and we got that, but it was a low rate, and I said, "No, it's not right, Tony. You're seriously ill". So we fought for that, went in, and they said yes. We had an appeal, and they said yes, the higher rate. And I don't know if it was someone from Alderley Court, another patient, who said to Tony, "You should get a war pension for this, so I looked it up, and we put in a claim, which started at 30%, but it was just getting worse and worse, and I said, "Well, no, we're not making it up. I'm not having it", so we put in, and they put it up to 70%.

By this time, Tony was drinking more, and I could see it. I used to say to him, "Oh, your head is playing you up", and he wouldn't tell you about a lot of things. I know he did sob about one where he was a young soldier who was on the helicopter with him, and he'd been shot and his brains were hanging out, and he was trying to hold them in and the officer who was with him said, "Leave it. He's dead more or less", and Tony wouldn't leave it because the young lad was still breathing a bit, so they had to [unclear] then, and I think he couldn't get over that as well.

So, we fought for the war pension, and we appealed that and had to go through the appealing, and that used to make me cross because soldiers, ex-soldiers, sailors, ex-military, they have pride, and he hated being on benefits. And I thought you shouldn't have to fight for it. His drinking was getting worse, and he was drinking more and more when his head was playing him up, and I thought that's connected. No one told us that alcohol could be connected to post-traumatic stress. I said, "No, Tony, it's something to do with your drinking", but he wouldn't stop. He had a few more trips to Alderley Court because he enjoyed it. But the only thing was, which I felt they did wrong, was because

he was having alcohol, and it was coming up in his medical notes, because he would talk to the doctors, you know, he was drinking quite a lot to cope with it. So they said you can't have a drink there, which is fine, but then you've got other soldiers there, who, because it wasn't in their medical notes, they could go out and get drunk. Tony never got paralytic or anything. He was just drinking, and it was never vicious. It was just the drink controlling him, to help him. He couldn't accept that. That half of them could drink and half of them ... He said that no one should drink. So I think he used to go out, and of course they said, "No, you can't stay if you're going to drink", which was fair enough. So they stopped having him there unless he could stop drinking altogether. You're talking about this going on for about eight years, so it was getting intense. He was alcoholic by then. I knew he was.

I: So in the process of him not being able to go back to the residential, were there any other services put in place at that time?

R: No, not that I know of. And then, of course, Combat Stress, they'd come out every now and then. And then – I can't remember the man – he was leaving, and then we never saw anybody after that, so there was a big gap between who'd see how he was getting on. And I used to say to him, you know, over the years, "You should get in touch", but he'd say, "No, they've got young men coming up. I don't think there's anything they can do for me". But it was getting steady worse and worse. And it was a hard life. I think I would have left a few times. If I'd left, I knew he would have been dead. So, it was a hard life. And it was a hard life for his family because they'd come and visit but he wouldn't want to ... the noise, the children and that. Because he looked after them when their first marriage split up. They had contact with their mother after, you know. And he was a very nice personality man, very caring, so it must have affected them a lot because they were moaning, "Oh, he's drinking", and all this and that, and they were pulling back a bit, but like I said to him, it wasn't his fault at the time, I could see it. It was to do with his illness, but of course he didn't want them all around him. It was just me and my youngest, Mark. But that's another story because I think the shock he had with his father really affected him. So when he was fourteen they diagnosed him with schizophrenia. So I had Mark and I had Tony. So it was a fun house.

I: Very difficult for you then?

R: Yeah. There was always humour with Tony. He never lost his black sense of humour. And I made sure every October ... They had a signals reunion in Doncaster, so I used to take him, and we'd go there, and he'd meet all his old friends. Because he was a very loveable character, and he had hundreds of friends, everybody knew him. Even the officers knew him. I used to make sure he got there because he used to love talking to everyone, but that was it really. That was all he had.

I: Did you or he have contact with other ex-service men and women?

R: Only that, only the reunions. Only the people that he knew close. Only the reunions what I used to take him to. All we knew at the time was Alderley Court. We didn't know anything else that there. Whether there was, we didn't know. He was gradually getting worse, and he was falling over a lot. He wasn't drunk, but he was on a lot of medication because we were seeing the ordinary mental health [service], who were a waste of time, but we were seeing them, and he was on a lot of medication to try to do the anxiety and the depression. So he had a few falls over the years. He broke both hips, his back. He had a wedge fracture, so he lost five inches in height. But when he'd done that, we took him into A&E and the doctor said no, because he'd only picked something up, and the doctor said, "No, it's just your muscle", and didn't even bother with an x-ray. Nowadays I would have said, "I want it done", but they didn't.

By then his other health was going down. His liver, because of the drinking and all that. He never drunk shorts, it was just beer. We found out after that he'd had wedge fractures and his spine was all bent. So by now, this is going over the years. I've had him in and out of hospital mental-wise, and he died aged 59, and I'd say he looked about 89. All we had was the war pension, living disability allowance, and then I said to him ... I can't remember, three or four years ago ... about three years before he died or two years ... I said to him, "Your alcohol is to do ...". Because I used to go on the internet and have a look, you know, about post-traumatic stress disorder because they never really give you any ... the family ... they tend to ... It's more to do with him. They don't say to me, "Well this is what you're going to expect". I had to learn it myself over a good few years what it was. And in the mental health [service] they took no notice of me whatsoever. One time we had an appointment with a psychiatrist, and he asked Tony how he was doing, and Tony was a bit depressed, so I tried to say, and he said to me, "I'm not interested in what you've got to say, I want to talk to him". And, of course, he [Tony] lost his temper, he said, "You wouldn't know anything if it wasn't for my wife. I wouldn't talk about anything. You wouldn't know anything". So you'd get no support for families. You still don't, I don't think.

So it was a learning curve, but I used to look on the internet and say alcohol seems to be playing a lot on your illness, and there were a lot of other service people who were, you know, getting drunk or ending in the gutter. So we put in for his war pension. We said, "No, he's getting worse. We're putting in for higher [rates]". And we had to appeal because they said "No", and then we went for the appeal and they accepted it was alcohol dependency because of post-traumatic stress, but we had to fight to get it, and it used to make me mad because I said, "We're not lying". Because if you'd said to Tony, "We'll take all your benefits away and take any of the thoughts in your head, and you'd be a dustman", he'd be there. And that's the trouble, you see. In the end, before he died, he was up to 100% war pension because he was that bad.

But we had all the ups and ... But there's such a lot. You could sit here for hours talking about over the years. It's a terrible, terrible ... And the trouble is because it's mental. If he'd had his legs blown off or his arms, they would have said, "Oh ...", you know, but because it's mental, they didn't see it. I still remember when I went to his inquest, and I'll come back to that, you see ... But when they did a thing on it, they looked into it, to how he was allowed, in my eyes, just to die, so they looked into that. The first bit of this report I saw and it said "a 59-year-old unemployed man", and that annoyed me because he was not an unemployed man. My husband did 22 years, he was not unemployed. And he [the coroner] accepted that, and he changed it. But when I went for the inquest, it was still that old bit, and when I said it to the inquest coroner, he didn't want to know. But I thought, no, it's not right because you wouldn't say if a soldier were lying in bed with no arms and legs, "a 39-year-old unemployed man", would you? Because it's mental, "unemployed man". And I thought, all he put up with over the years, and he's classed as an unemployed man.

But no, he didn't get any real help. And the mental health [service] ... Well, I don't know about other areas, but Wakefield, West Yorkshire, is disgusting. I had to look things up and try and find things. We managed to plod on. And then 2012 ... 2013, so we had no contact from Combat Stress, we only had the war pension, we had no support from anywhere else. I mean, he was getting 100% war pension, which was enough. I had him and I had my son, who is 28 now, and he is mentally ill as well. So I was caring for both of them, and of course when my husband got worse, my son would be worrying about him, so he'd get worse, so I had both of them, but you only get one carer's allowance. They don't give you two, they only give you one. You're entitled to it, but you only get one. So I couldn't work, of course. I had the two of them.

I: So did you work outside the home during your marriage?

R: Well I did try. When we were married and we had seven children I went out. I'd try anything, me: restaurant, waitress. You need money, you've got to go work for it. That's the way it is. My children and his children were all like that, except for my poor son, who would love to work. He wanted to join the Army of course, but he can't, not with mental illness like that. But they've all worked, and that's the way it is. So I did try to work but I'd have to keep leaving jobs and I thought it's not fair. You start work somewhere and then you've got to ... And then as he got worse, and then my son starting to get ... because I thought it was just a depression over his father, but it started coming out now he's something else coming out. But I think it was the shock of seeing his father like that that brought it first out.

So I couldn't work. I was stuck here with the both of them. My husband was still drinking and because he wasn't working, I wouldn't let him have any alcohol in the house, but he'd just sit here, and we're talking near the end now, when the post-traumatic stress was really ... in about 2012 ... so, I'd had it all that time up to then. He was steadily getting worse, and it was a constant battle to stop him drinking. And in the end, you know, it pushes you down. I used to take him to the pub ... because he was that physically ... he couldn't drive or anything. I would take him to the pub, leave him for two hours and pick him up, so at least he was getting out, and then bring him back, and then have no drink in the house. I mean, even at night I used to have to get up with him because I didn't know, because he'd have falls or he'd switch the cooker on and didn't know he was doing it, you know. He couldn't sleep. Sometimes I'd be sitting there dying to go to bed, but I'd have to see if I could get him. And his tablets, I had to have them in a safe because he would keep taking his sleeping tablets, trying to get himself out of what he was thinking. So my whole life was stuck around him.

And in 1912 [2012], he just started getting worse and worse, and he was talking about, really, suicide then. But we were just with the ordinary mental health [service]. Every outpatient appointment. Every couple of months you might see the psychiatrist. I used to take him every time, every appointment I took him, even if he didn't want to go because I said, "If you lose contact, Tony, how the hell are we going to get you any help?" So I used to take him and that. But the trouble was he'd see a psychiatrist for two visits, and then the next time it'd be a different one. And then he'd got to go through all ... And Tony, he wouldn't like talking about it, in the Army and that. He might talk and laugh with his friends, but he wouldn't talk about it because I could see it would start coming up. And then they'd want to know the beginning, so he'd have to start again and that. In the end, he was on that many tablets. And they'd say "Well, we'll take these off and we'll try them", and I'd say to them, "You're doing that, and I'm looking after him while he's going off his head. You know. If you're going to try and change different tablets, can you not have him admitted?" "No, no, care in the home". I said, "Yeah, you mean 'get on with it'". He got his tablets, but they were not controlling it, they were keeping him down. So that was it, just outpatients' appointment.

And then he was really talking about suicide in 2012. I think it was in 2012 or 2013, he did really lose control. I used to have to put his tablets away, lock them up, because he'd take them all, but then he was losing ... really going downhill, and I tried to get him some help mentally, but I couldn't. Because they were moving all the mental health around, he was under some other area, but he was still having outpatients at local area. It was a hard job trying to find out who was supposed to be looking after him.

I: And this was all NHS? No military help?

R: Yeah. We had no other help whatsoever. We didn't know of any. Only Combat Stress. But then we thought because the one who used to see Tony had left, we were seeing no-one visiting, and Tony said, "Well they're getting a lot of young ones coming up now. We won't bother them because they've got enough on". And I thought, well that's right, they only have so many staff. What can you do? So, it was just mental health [services], and it was me having to constantly fight to get anything.

In 2013 he really lost his mind, and I could tell that because usually I could control him because we'd have a row, and he would listen, or I could calm him down, but there was just nothing there, just nothing. So I tried to get him some mental health help. He had no psychiatrist nurse seeing him. Mark I was trying to get changed over to adult's one, so I was more worried about my son. He had no mental health nurse. He was only an outpatient, and I think they just thought at the time that he was an alcoholic because he had alcohol dependency, and they just thought wino. He was really going down then. He lost four inches in height. I got him a shed. In Wakefield, there was a mental health hospital here and a charity, it must have a trust, who gave the land to mental health. Every year they put in the paper, we're going to put out some money, from the interest, for any mental health people, if you put in a bid, you could get some help. And I thought, what if I got him a shed and some tools for woodwork because at the beginning of his mental illness, he went to do woodwork, and it was something to fix on. So I put in for that, and they were helpful. They gave me all the money, and I got all the shed done, but of course then his spine went, so he couldn't go in there, but I kept it all locked up.

Well in 2012 his head was really going. He wasn't drinking more because I was controlling him by then. I was taking him and bringing him back, and it was arguments all the time about wanting ... So I was still controlling what he was drinking. He wouldn't stop, and I knew that. But one night he must have crept up, and I could hear some scraping noise. He was trying to get into the shed because he had to get a chair because he couldn't reach it to get some electric tools to cut his hands off. So, I get the ambulance out, they take him into A&E, and he'd be there and then the mental health would come out, and I said, "He's not coming home". And I think he [the mental health worker] was from Pontefract, he was supposed to be under them, a different area, I don't know. Anyway, I said, "He's not coming home. He needs a psychiatrist". Well at the local hospital, Pinderfields then, what they did was they worked on you physically. When they've sorted that out, they worked on the mental bit. But he needed it both together. And I had to say he wasn't coming home, and I could see them looking at me thinking, "Oh you just want a rest". I knew what it was. I said, "He isn't coming home. He needs to be admitted to hospital", and he was asking to be admitted to a mental hospital. "No, no, we don't do that anymore". So I said, "He's not coming home", and they wanted to send him home. "No, no". So he moved into a ward and I went in there, and he was quite poorly then. And they said, "We've got a crisis team, from the hospital mental health. If you need us, we'll be there". And I said, "I give up. Alright, I'll take him home".

So I took him home, and then from where he was supposed to be with, Pontefract, they phoned up and said. "Would you like respite?" And I thought, "That's all you think I want is respite. I've got another son up there, you know". But then I thought, if I get respite and they put him in a home, they can see I'm not making it up, that he's going Yeah, yeah, I'll have respite. She said, "Well, pack a bag", she said, "and put all his tablets in". So I did that. "And someone will come 'round and take him and let you have respite for a week". And I thought, if he gets in a home, they're going to see there's something seriously wrong with this man. So, I had it all packed there, and he was waiting, and then Social Services came 'round and said, "Sorry, we can't get you in at the moment". So, ... It wasn't so much about the respite, but that I wanted someone to see he's not well. He went to bed, I got him to bed, and then ... I can't remember .. because he'd already gone back in in the middle of the night one night to the A&E, and when they take him in

the A&E, they like a medication, so I said to him, going in, because I thought if I keep going in there, I keep shouting them round, I thought I'm spoiling it for him, I want them to see. You know what I mean? You shouldn't have to fight.

He went in one night, this is in between, with his medication in the ambulance, and crisis team saw him in the hospital and said, "No, he's alright". And they sent him home with his medication. He came in a taxi, and I said, "Are you tired?", and he said, "Yeah". I said, "Sleep there". And they didn't tell me they sent tablets with him, so he took his tablets. I mean it could be made into a comedy, honestly. Anyway, he took an overdose when he wasn't going to the respite because his tablets were out, and I'm worn out by then, and he took an overdose and is back in hospital again. I kept saying to them, "He's not scared of pain. He will do it". So he was in there for a little while because he took the overdose, and then they wanted to send him home again. I said, "He needs help. He's not coming home". I said, "He's not coming home. I'm not having him home. He needs help". You shouldn't have to beg, should you, for mental health. The Sister phoned me up from the ward that had him on and said to me "Your husband is ready to come home", and I said, "I told you he needs mental health [help]. I want a psychiatrist". She said, "We don't do that in here. This is an ordinary hospital. He's coming home". And I said, "He's not coming home", and I put the phone down. And he's asking it for it himself, "I need help". I went to the shop. This was during the day. I come back. I have to take my son with me because he won't stay on his own. He's scared of being on his own, so I have to drag him everywhere. I came back, and I get a phone call from this homeless shelter in Wakefield, saying: "We've got your husband sitting here". I said, "What's he doing there?" She said, "I don't know, the ambulance dropped him off and left him". And he was in his pyjamas and his dressing gown. She said, "The ambulance dropped him off because they said he had nowhere to go". You couldn't make it up. So, I get in the car, and he was sitting outside, talking to two young men. You could see they were druggies, hanging around the homeless shelter. They'd given him a fag because he'd talked to them and sitting out in his pyjamas and dressing gown. They said, "We don't know why he's here. Good job he's got your phone number". So the ambulance must have come to try to drop him off. I wasn't here, and they just chucked him here. I'm not lying. So I bring him home.

That night, I'd given him his sleeping tablets, gotten him to bed. I fell asleep, and I could hear the door going "bang bang", you know that patio door. And as I come down, he's sitting there with a carving knife, and he's trying to carve his thumb off, and I said, "What are you doing?" And he's tried to smash his finger off, and he said, "If I do it this way I'll die quicker". I get the ambulance out again. They take him in A&E, and they put him on the surgical ward because he's cut right through, sawed it off. They patched him up, and then they wanted to send him home again. I said "I'm not having it. If you don't do something about it, I'm going to the papers because this man is going to kill himself". So they said, "We'll have a meeting with the crisis team". I came in at three o'clock to see him in the ward where he'd had his hand all patched up, and a woman from the crisis team was there, and I said "I've been told they've got a bed in Fielding, which is a mental ...". She said, "Don't know who's told you that. There's no beds". She said, "He's going to have to come home". I said, "No". She said, "I promise you, we will help you". I said "It's in the night that he starts panicking". "We will help you". "You promise?" "Yes".

I got him home eight o'clock that night. He said, "I'm going to kill myself". So I phoned them up and asked them to come out. So she said, "Phone the police". I said, "I'm not phoning the police on my husband". They sent out the police, and he was locked up all night in a cell. And in the end, even then, five o'clock in the morning, a psychiatrist nurse from the crisis team went to see him, and she said to me, "We're bringing him home", and I said "You're not bringing him home. He needs help. He is not coming in this house. He is not coming home. Leave him there". And, luckily, the psychiatrist who knew Tony

– because he knew Mark as well, he had a couple of treatments seeing Tony – he phoned me up just after her and said, “What the hell has happened to Tony?”, and I told him. “Don’t worry, I’ll get him a bed”, and they got him in a private ... because Fielding was full up ... they got him in there. They still would have sent him home.

And what post-traumatic stress needs, military, I don’t know about anybody else ... They’re scared they’re going to hurt someone. They’re scared they won’t be able to stop themselves hurting someone. All they need when they’re going through a crisis is being somewhere secure where they feel safe. He was in there for two weeks, or a week and a half. It’s like a pressure cooker, and he started coming down. He came home again. And then it started again in 2015, no one would listen, and he killed himself. Exactly the same in 2015. But at least he is better off now, that’s the way I look at it. But we had no help, from mental health. In 2013 I got in touch with Combat Stress, when he did all that, and it said someone came out to see us from Combat Stress, and I said, “He needs intensive care”. “Well, you know he won’t be able to go to Alderley Court again because he is physically ill as well”. And I said, “Alright, fair enough, but there must be something you can do”. He said, “What about if you get onto the British Legion and have a break? Or there’s a good charity in Jersey, Holiday for Heroes. You can have a break with them”. And I said, “Ok”, and I wrote to them in 2013, and they gave us a week, was it, or two weeks, might be a week, in Jersey, all paid. We went to a hotel – I could take Mark as well because I couldn’t leave him – a hotel in Jersey and it opened my eyes because you’d see all these young soldiers there, and I’d think to myself, “My god, what are they going to go through?” Because my husband has had it for years. All people in Jersey, they put in the money. This couple started it on their farm. You can only go once. They’ve done families, they’ve done thousands, and it’s all from these people in Jersey. We had a lovely week.

I: And did Tony have a good week as well?

R: He had a lovely week, talking to soldiers and that. There were Irish soldiers there, there were younger ones, quite a few younger ones, and you could see they were going through the same with their mental health local area [services]. Some of them were even on tablets, Diazepam, which is very addictive, and it’s only like a little tranquilizer.

I: And did you connect with any of the other wives or family members as well?

R: Well yes. Oh yeah. One young bloke he didn’t bring his wife because they were splitting up because of his stress, and he said, “I wish I’d brought her for her to talk to you because you know you more than anyone. You know more than a doctor. You even know more than your husband because you’re coping with it”. Yeah, they were all like that. You’d sit in a room with them, and when we first got there we were given our room, and you sit in a lounge, and they pay out for all different hotels, and because Tony was a bit disabled so we got a disabled one. All over Jersey hotels that they put them up in. And you could see sitting in a room, I could pick them out, cause there was some older ones who were disabled, nothing got to do with military. And I said to Tony, “He’s got post-traumatic stress”. He’d pick up a book, and he’d try to read it, this man, and he’s going through it like that and then he starts again because nothing is going in. And this other one was up and down, up and down. What got me was these young blokes, I think, “Oh my god”. There was this one young man, big muscly. I don’t know if his was to do with the Falklands or maybe Iraq. He doesn’t go out, he said, because people start trying to fight, and he’s scared he’s going to hurt someone. Half of them aren’t on proper medication and they don’t want one. He said he just sees an ordinary doctor, they haven’t put him into mental health. All over the country this is, in Britain. So I thought I hope they don’t come to West Yorkshire. They haven’t got a hope in hell.

I: None of those other families had any military support, as far as you knew?

R: I don't know about military support. There was one sailor man, with his wife, They were nice, and I think they had more support. I don't know whether it was the Navy or whatever, but they had a bit. I mean, you don't want to go too much into their personal life, only what they've talked. But they all had that ... Even when they were ill and you could see that they were suffering ... There was one para bloke, and he had to have someone with him, either a carer or a friend, and one para bloke, I'd say he was about 40, and his friend who was another ex-para, and he wasn't well, and you could see them suffering, but they still had that sense of humour. They'd crack a joke with each other, and they connect like that, and I think it opens their eyes. These people, they hadn't even been anywhere. Some of them weren't even in the mental health team, and you could see them saying, "There's other people like me", because they can't understand it. It helps them talking. They were brilliant, Jersey. You went out and didn't pay going into [unclear]. They took us into an under tunnel and of course Tony was alright, but there was that young one, and I said to him, "You've got to go through it", and there was like bombs going off. Anyhow, he ran through it, this young man, because of the bombs going off. But it was brilliant, and we had a lovely time. So they're all out of the services now.

I: So Combat Stress put you in touch with the Holidays for Heroes. Was there any follow-up after that then?

R: No. We got a letter from Combat Stress saying we have to go through our local mental health now, and I thought we haven't got a hope now, and that's how he died in 2015. We hadn't got a hope in hell then. We didn't know about any outreach things. Wasn't until after he died that I found out there was one in Hull, and then they were passing the buck. Mental health were passing the buck, saying it was the doctors who should have done it. I put complaints in, and they all come up with the same I emailed the government saying what was happening to ex-service, and they said well you've got that Military Covenant. And you know what they said, the National Health, they must have put someone in, because he died, they had to do an enquiry. And the man who'd come see me, he said their answer was Wakefield hadn't signed up to it. Barnsley apparently had, so why didn't they say to us we'll let you go to Barnsley? Wakefield hadn't signed up to it. No one told us. You've got to find out for yourself.

I: So the onus was on you entirely, and you obviously had your hands full, ...

R: Yeah. Well if the professionals are not saying to you, such and such, what help do you get? You've got to find out for yourself. Luckily, I had years of experience, but the poor young ones coming up. It doesn't go away, that's the problem, see. It doesn't go away. It's entrenched over the years, and it's hard to shift it.

I: It sounds like you had a very difficult time navigating all of the different services.

R: Then in 2015, he was starting again. I wasn't well and he went in twice in the middle of the night because he knew he was going to do something, and they just sent him home again. Then, Tuesday night, he went in, and they sent him back again, at twelve o'clock at night, I got him to bed, he was asleep. The next morning, I nipped to the shop because my sister lives near now, so I took her shopping, and I came back and he was sitting with loads of his tablets. He'd taken my son's – my son is on very strong medication – so he'd taken my son's. I got the ambulance, and he died a couple of days after. All his family came down. And then, even then, after he'd died, we wanted to bury him before Christmas, on 16th, all his Army mates, on his regiment webpage, there were hundreds of them saying, "Oh, I can't believe he died", and all this because he was a monkey, the

things he got up to. And then the doctor hadn't even written the letter out, so we had to cancel the funeral and got it again for the 23rd, and that was a struggle. I had to chase the doctor to write a letter. So we did it then. It was packed with all his Army mates. He had the Last Post and everything. And then after that I put in for my war widows' [pension] because I wasn't sure what money I was going to be getting, and the welfare of the War Pension Office. They came out, and she helped me a lot.

I: Ok. Would you tell us a little bit about that maybe?

R: Right. She came out, very good. I phoned them up and said he'd died and they said, "Right someone will come out and help you". Of course, I had it ongoing trying to get him buried before Christmas. I didn't want him lying in there over Christmas, so we had that, and then we couldn't get him buried. But she helped me with that. We'd given our house up and everything because we couldn't afford it, so that's why we were in rented, you know, [accommodation] over the years. We were told we could have a couple of thousand to bury him because he was a war pensioner, which we got, and also because I was under retirement age when he died it was £2000 they gave me to bury him because I was under retirement age when he died. So I'd got £4,000 to bury him. So she was very helpful, phoned up the Welfare, and she would come, or someone would get back to me, and then help me sort it out because I've got the Army pension and all that. Because I've got him [Mark] dependent on us, which is only just me, so they sorted my money out. I mean, the War Widows' [Pension] was £135 or £136, that was it, and I thought there's no way I'm going to manage, but then because of his Army pension, because he did 22 years, they did that, and then I got extra because he died ... like as they classed him ... So I thought I well I could manage all that now with the money-wise. But I still couldn't get a carer's [allowance] for my son Mark because I was getting the War Widows' [Pension]. It's a joke, isn't it? But the money, that side was a great help. Then I put a complaint in about how he died. But that side of it, welfare, that was a great help.

I: What about emotional support? Nothing beyond that?

R: No. I mean, when he died, they give you a booklet saying if you want to, you know ... Which was good in the hospital. And they laid him out. Because all his children came and his son, who was still in the Army doing a job. So they were all there, we were all there when he died because he had a heart attack and they kept him alive for a day, and then we said, "No", we didn't want him to suffer". He wanted to go, he was fed up with it. They laid him out nice in intensive care. I couldn't knock the intensive care. The rest of the hospital is crap, but intensive care ... They laid him out lovely, and they gave me a book saying, "If you need support ...". But, to be honest, when you've spend that years with no support, having to work it all out for yourself, you don't look anywhere for support. What's the point? Luckily, I'm quite a strong person, so if it had been someone weaker I don't think the marriage would have survived, but I am quite strong, so ...

I: What about family support?

R: Oh yes. His children came down from Scotland, his son came up through him dying, and that. So I had all the support there. There's six of them, they're all grown up, so I had the support there, and my daughter she was there. So I had the support there. We worked out the funeral, and one of his sons, Alan, he was coming down and phoning up the hospital to try to get this letter, and he was saying, "Get in touch with me. Don't be upsetting Mother. She's got enough". I couldn't fault the children. They all helped in their own way. And then we had the funeral. The support was there.

It was Mark who needed more support, which he didn't get because they were changing the mental health [service provision] around again, so they were shoving him somewhere else. He had a good support worker before they changed it. He saw someone in December, just after Tony died, I think it was, but then he was moved. No one's been in touch with him asking how he's coping with his father killing himself. So, I had to push because he's in a new area. I had a kick off about that, and said, "Why hasn't anyone seen him?" I know [it's] because it's changing around. Funny enough, his support worker, who was brilliant, she used to talk to Tony as well when she'd come to visit him. She said that she's going on, and I think it's because of what happened to Tony, she's going on to learn about post-traumatic stress. Military. Which is completely different from civvies. Perhaps it might change in Wakefield because that old saying, "We've learnt by our mistakes". But they never do. He's had no support, so I've had to fight about that.

I: So that consumes your life at the moment?

R: Yeah. Tony's gone, and I've got to worry about him [Mark] now. I know for a fact that he's been talking about suicide. He said, "If anything happens to you, Mum, I'm going to kill myself". His answer is, "Dad didn't look in pain". They need to sort out mental health [support].

I: Can you talk a little bit about how you joined the War Widows' Association after Tony's death?

R: Yes, I had a look through the website, you know, just to see what was out there. And I thought, I can join [the] War Widows' [Association]. He was proud of being in the Army. I wouldn't wish anybody would go in the Army. I said to him plenty of times, you know, "I wish you were never in the Army", and he said, "Well, if I saved one life (which he would have done, he'd have saved a few), it's worth it". I said, "What? This?" He said, "Yeah it's worth it". So I said I'd join the War Widows' [Association].

I: Have you met any other war widows?

R: No, I don't think the area I'm in that they've got a [regional group] because I've looked through the book, and they haven't. So I saw that. They send out the booklets and all that, so I saw that [advert] about this [project], and I said I'll do that because widows, and families, you do a lot for your country, and they should remember that. And, of course, the men. But it doesn't mean to say that a war widow is someone where he suddenly dies; it's like a death that's dragging out, and they should know that. There's a lot more younger ones coming up now.

I: Your experience of being a war widow has stretched over a number of years, even though Tony only died two years ago. Do you feel that your community recognises that? Did you feel like that over the years?

R: No. I don't feel the family get any support, even from Combat Stress. After [leaving service] it's all about the soldier, which is fair enough. The family don't get any support. When they're suffering like that, it's not quick. Children don't get that sudden shock, "Oh, he's gone". You're watching him die before your eyes. Children, who thought the world of their father, watching him drifting away. They gave me no support, now. No one. He always used to like to go to the war memorial on [Remembrance Day]. This year, I said to Sharon [daughter], "Well, I'm going to go because he liked going". Even when I was pushing the wheelchair, he wanted to go. I phoned up the British Legion, I ordered the thing, the wreath for the war widows, and I thought, "I'm doing this for Tony". The British Legion and some of his men, two LI (Light Infantry), were marching, and a couple of them, the older ones, said "Oh, Tony", because they had been at his funeral. They said

he was brilliant. They'd been on exercise with him in the middle of nowhere, and it was freezing. He'd say, I'm not putting up with this, and he'd go, and he'd come back with two mugs of tea, and they never knew where he'd got them from! So, a lot of them had good memories of Tony. So, we did that but no one came up and spoke to us, apart from them soldiers, even afterwards, when we stood in the town hall for a cup of tea. No one even asked us, "Who are you?"

I: So a quite isolating experience?

R: Yeah, you are [isolated]. And because I was getting the Housing Benefit, they didn't know what they were doing. They said, "We're sorry", in the Housing Benefit office, "We've never had a war widow before". It's not very well known. People don't know that there are families, not just a widow, who are trying to carry on. It's very quick. Very quick memory.

I: Could you reflect on the effect of Tony's illness and subsequent death on your own mental and physical wellbeing?

R: I'm quite a strong person, but I suffered for years with depression, and that was all from Tony, and then, of course, with Mark coming up as well. My personality changed. I was a more happy-going person, and even the children noticed that, than what I have been for the past years. And now I don't like a picture of Tony. I can't look at him, so I've got that one there, and that's the one my son has on his wall. But I think I've started to come to myself, but that's not through any support. It's not through anything ... "We're sorry what happened". That's just me. I don't think the areas, wherever you live, think too much about what's left behind. What a waste. I think it's a waste. My husband, he'd say he'd do it again, but I think it's a waste. But you don't get the support [for] the families, especially the children. He changed in their eyes over the years. In the end, they didn't really want to come and visit him. It's your family, it changes. But that's with a slow death. Quick death it's all shock, and it must be horrible, but mine was a slow death, so completely different than someone actually getting shot, but it's still the same. You're not classed as that by the mental health [services]. Like in that report he's "an unemployed man". They wouldn't dream of putting that down if he were lying in bed, like some poor soldier or sailor or a woman with no arms and no legs. They wouldn't say she was an unemployed woman, 39 or 49-year-old. An injured soldier. Which he was. I think it's probably been like that all through the years.

I: You don't have any sense of it improving over the years?

R: Well, I suppose I probably get better than someone in the First World War or something. They didn't have anything then. Words are so easy for the government. They're so easy. I get enough money. That's probably improved, which does help. I'd love to go to work. I've always loved to go to work, but I can't do it now because of Mark. I couldn't leave him. I've still got him, so it's still ongoing. I always say his illness started because of his father, because he was so young, watching it. I don't know. I think a lot of people think war widows are really old women, Second World War, and it's not. It's young women, young men. They can't get out of the idea, Second World War. It's so quickly in their mind gone again.

I: Do you think the Army, or the military, could have provided you with different or better supports?

R: I think it would have been nice at his service ... and I know his was a long death ... but that his regiment could have personally gotten in touch. Privately he had hundreds of friends, and I could phone up one of them and they would help, but maybe the regiment

saying, well, "I'm sorry", and maybe saying, "Would you like to go to a Remembrance Sunday, and I will come and take you". Instead of me having to try and do that. I'd only do it for him. I may be biased, but I feel that this country doesn't deserve men like him. But I would do it for him, but you think that maybe if they'd do it ... He's gone, but there are his children, his grandchildren. Some of them still having them now, that will never know him. And he was a great bloke. All the early memories of his children are wiped out by the older memories where he wasn't right. That's the only thing, it's still ongoing for the families. He might have died but it's still ongoing.

I: Do you have a number of grandchildren now?

R: Between us, we have fourteen or fifteen, and still going. The older ones know Tony, but not like they should do, because he couldn't take the noise.

I: You mentioned support from the family around the time of the funeral and in the immediate aftermath of Tony's death. Is that ongoing?

R: Yes, my daughter, she came with me to the war memorial. She's got her own life, she's got children, but yeah, it's there. My stepson, Alan, who is in Scotland. Because Mark only had his father, he's got no one else. It's only me, so he'll come shopping with me, and come walking around. Anyway, he phones Mark every day without fail, talks to him, and Sharon will take him out. And Alan and Tony's daughters, when he died, they've stayed, so I have that support there. Well I brought them up anyway. They were young. Well, a couple of them were. But that's the main thing, Mark getting the support.

I: How do you think your life will progress now? Do you think being a war widow will be part of your identity?

R: Yeah. I feel though my husband has died and he's done his part for his country I'd like people to realise that war widows are ongoing. It doesn't just stop. You are a war widow forever, and if it's sudden, which is horrendous, or if it's slow, which is horrendous, you're still a war widow, so it doesn't stop. So, I think it needs to be a bit more aware that there are a lot more younger war widows coming up, and they need the support. I think half of it is just being recognised. Yes, I've done years of looking after someone with post-traumatic stress. You've done good. But even if your husband got shot and dropped down dead. Yeah, we understand that you've given a lot for this country. It's not just the man or woman who died. It's the family who've given a lot for the country. You don't get that recognised. The government needs to say, "Look what they've given. Look what they're continuously giving". Even the grandchildren, what they're giving, they'll never know him. Instead of just [being] forgotten about.

I: Recognise that it goes on forever?

R: It will go on forever. The children's father is gone, or the grandchildren. I never knew my granddad. Ge died whatever circumstances. It wasn't just an illness. You're still giving. they'll be giving all their life. They've given their father and grandfather for their country. It doesn't just stop when they die. Perhaps the government should say, "Yes, wait a minute". I got £135 pension ...

I: You were saying you put in for the child allowance?

R: Yes, I put in for the child allowance because he's relying on me. He'll never work. He wants to, but he'll never work. It just gets worse. I think it's got worse since his father died. It's his friend, "My mate, my best mate, my only mate". He's got no other friend, except for his brother. They said, "Yes, you qualified for the war widows extended

benefit, and we're pleased to tell you, you get a pound a week". For Mark. I thought that's probably because you get sickness benefit. I phoned up and said, "A pound?!" I got offered that in my first divorce in my daughter and son's maintenance, a pound for them. I phoned them up and said, "What's this pound for?" And she said, "Oh, it's always been a pound". It's probably been a pound since the First World War. She said, "It's always been a pound". Probably for the adolescents. I don't know about the little ones. She said, "It's always been a pound since I worked here", and she sounded quite old. I thought that was a joke!

I: Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?

R: No, I've gone 'round about a bit.

I: No it was wonderful and thank you so much.



Fig. 7: Wendy Hutchinson with a photograph of her husband, Tony. 28 April 2017.



War Widows' Stories

History. Memories. Heritage.

An Interview with Christiane Kirton

25 June 2017

Conducted by Nadine Muller



The War Widows'
Association
of Great Britain



LOTTERY FUNDED



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To do so, and for any other questions about this interview, how you may use it, or about the project, please contact Dr Nadine Muller via email (info@warwidowsstories.org.uk), or by post at the following addressing: John Foster Building, Liverpool John Moores University, 80-98 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, L3 5UZ.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

I = Interviewer

R = Respondent / Interviewee

[] = Clarification note

I: Today is the 25th June 2017. Could you tell me your full name please?

R: Christiane Agnes Kirton.

I: Thank you very much. And your age, Chrissie?

R: I have to keep thinking about that ... 1920.

I: That's when you were born? Ok. So you're 97. Excellent. Very impressive.

R: 97!

I: I know! Nearly a century!

R: An old bird. [Laughter]

I: I wouldn't say that! Chrissie, what can you remember about your childhood, where were you born, where did you grow up, who were your parents? Do you want to tell me a little bit about that?

R: Yes. I was born in South Shields. We lived in a two-room flat. A family of about six. We had beds in the living room that we took down in the morning, and put them up at night.

I: So that was because the flat was so small and there were so many of you? You had to make the beds in the living room? What do you remember about your parents?

R: My father was gassed in the First World War and he was always poorly. I don't think he'd ever worked. He couldn't get his breath. When I was only little, I knew daddy was going to work, and he worked down the pit, of all places. And he never complained. He never sat in his chair moping or nothing like that. He used to cobble our shoes: sole them with leather and the last I remember is him making soles and putting them on our shoes. He was a good dad. A family dad.

I: What made him a good dad?

R: I don't know. I think he was just that sort of that. He was a real dad. If I wanted anything I went and told him. He didn't want you to do anything on the sly. He wanted you to be honest and open. If we'd say anything and he'd think it was out place he'd say, "Now then, now then!" [Laughter]. But we had a happy life.

I: Do you remember anything about your mother?

R: Oh yes. My mother used to take in washing in a wash house. In rain and snow. And I used to say to her, "Oh mum, why do you take in washing?" And she said, "Why do you eat bread and jam?" Ask a silly question, you get a silly answer. Which is quite true.

I: Do you remember anything about what you used to do as a child? What would your days look like in South Shields?

We lived at the seaside, and a lot of the time was spent down on the seafront. It had a lovely pier and lighthouse at the end. I've got nice memories of years ago.

R: My husband he came from Jarrow. That's like a nice town from Shouth Shields.

I: What did you used to do down by the seafront.

R: I did domestic work.

I: Do you remember when you started working?

R: Fourteen. Fourteen years old.

I: Can you remember much about that? What was it like starting work at fourteen?

I used to go out and go do domestic ... Oh and I met some women, some horrible women. They treated you like a dog, a slave. I had a hard life at work because I wasn't taught to do anything special.

My mother had eight children ... no six. She had three of each, I think, three girls and three boys. Then there was mum and dad. That was eight. I had a nice family. But we did an awful lot in the house. Mum would sooner have us round her than outside. She knew we were alright [then].

I: Do you remember going to school, Chrissie?

R: Just.

I: Do you remember what it was like? Do you remember where you went to school?

R: Yes. Laygate Lane School.

I: Was it good? Was it fun? Did you like it?

R: Oh yes. We had fun at school. I enjoyed going to school. I enjoyed that.

I: Did you stop going to school when you went into work at fourteen?

R: Fourteen yes. I was a housemaid. Doing other people's work.

I: How was that?

R: I'd only be fourteen. And I met some women.

I: Do you want to tell me about them?

R: I don't think I'd like to. They were horrible people.

I: Did they make you work hard as a girl?

R: You did two days work in one. They couldn't get enough out of you.

I: Even though you were still a child.

R: Yes, I was only fourteen when I went to do domestic [work]. My dad said he didn't want me to go working where there was money involved because he was always frightened that we'd get caught up in it, you know. So I went domestic, and I worked for some snooty-nosed people as well. Some were terrible.

I: When did you meet your then-future-husband for the first time?

R: I was seventeen. Oh now ... I think I was a lot younger than that. Maybe fourteen.

I: Do you remember meeting him for the first time?

R: We all used to go round in a crowd. And we had some fun. We lived at the seaside so in the summer we spent our time down on the beach and the sea.

I: You don't remember how you met your husband for the first time?

No. What I do remember is too bad to repeat.

R: Do you remember when you first started going out with your then-future husband? Do you remember your courtship?

I: Yes.

R: Do you remember anything about that?

I was only fourteen. He was a baker. He used to go out doing the bread, making the bread. We were so happy. I can't complain about that. He was so nice. He was so nice to me. He respected me. Because he knew I'd been put on over the years.

I had no childhood. Fourteen when I went to do domestic work. For about four shilling a week or something like that. I know I never had money. Mind, I think it's a good thing because I don't worry about it now. But to think that all them years ... they don't come back ... They were terribly miserable years. In my story,²⁹ I think I said it was the most miserable time in my life.

I: Because of the work?

R: Yes. I used to work for women ... She used to say, "Do it with vinegar and water, the furniture ... with a wash leather. Wipe it all down with a wash leather". And I knew she was a funny sort of woman that I worked for. And she said, "Have you done this?", and

²⁹ Interviewer clarification: Christiane had written down her life story by hand some time before this interview and refers to it throughout as "my story". See Fig. 5.

I said, "Yes". I'd do it with a wash leather and vinegar in the water and cleaned it up like that. And I remember one day she got on my nerves a bit and I thought I'm not going to do anything, I'm just going to take a duster over it. She came in and said, "Have you done it with a wash leather and vinegar water?" And I said, "Yes". And I hadn't [done it]. And she did that with her hand, [and said] "Filthy, dirty". And it wasn't. I think it was the last day of the week. She'd been on every day of the week and taken her fingers and run them [along the furniture] to see if she could find some dust. She never could, but she would always grumble. I didn't have a good life when I was cleaning.

I: Do you remember the time just before you married your husband?

R: Yes.

I: What was it like just before you got married.

Ah, he was a gentleman.

I: Why? What did he do?

He was a baker, and he used to fetch me my doughnuts every morning for breakfast because he worked nights in the bakery. I had some happy times. I had some sad times. When I first got war [widows] pension, I think it was 8 shilling a week, which I had to pay my rent from. There was nothing left for food. I used to go to mum, and she used to give us money for a loaf of bread. She wouldn't see the two children go home without anything in them. She was very kind to me. It's too sad. I can't do it.

I: Can I take you back to a happier time, Chrissie? Do you remember your wedding day?

R: Yes. I was only seventeen. I wrote my story, but ... I forget now.

I: That's ok.

R: It's not a very happy one.

I: That's ok, too. Not all stories are.

R: I don't like to talk about it.

I: That's ok. Is there anything you'd like to tell me that you feel you are able to talk about?

R: I never had any new clothes. All hand-me-downs because it was six of us. My mother had three of each. Three boys and three girls.

I: What were your siblings like? Did you get on with your siblings, with your brothers and sister?

R: Oh yes.

I: Yes? What did you get up to?

R: Going 'round knocking on people's doors and running away. We thought that was great fun. Until one day we did it at an old lady's house ... well, she wouldn't be old because they were old when they were married and had a family ... I couldn't put an age to them

... . I remember one day she did something. I don't know, I forget. I know I threw a bucket of water over somebody. I don't know what happened now ... I've forgotten now.

I: You sound like you were a handful knocking on people's doors and running away and throwing buckets over water over them.

R: If you were down and out, you were no good. Yet, my dad was a very strict dad. What he said was law.

I: Chrissie, do you remember how your father died?

R: How old?

I: Do you remember how he died? Why?

My mother and dad they looked after me. My pension wasn't enough to live on. They asked for a halfpenny when they were going to school and I had all the cushions off the big settee feeling down seeing if anything dropped out of anybody's pocket. And that was a hard time.

I: Chrissie when did your husband join the war?

R: He joined the Navy.

I: And that was in the Second World War?

R: Yes. And he was away. He moved away with the army. I brought two babies up myself. He was killed in April [1942]. And I was only 21. And I was left with two babies.

I: How old were your babies?

R: I would've been about twenty-one.

I: And How old were the children when your husband died? Were they very little?

R: I can't think. I can't think about it where they were or when I'd had them ... It's all gone. I don't want to remember then

I: Do you remember when you heard that your husband had died?

R: When I was ... ? When?

I: When your husband died. Do you remember how you heard about it? Did you get a letter? A telegram?

R: No, I can't remember. I wasn't very happy with my life. I can't remember.

I: You said your War Widows' Pension was very small. It wasn't enough to live on, you said.

R: Yes. Two babies.

I: Did you have to go to work?

R: Yes, I only knew domestic work. Wherever I got they'd all put on you and put on you. "Just do this ...", and the next week you'd go and "Would you do that?", and in the end, you're running the house for no extra money. They tried to get blood out of a stone. That sort of person. No matter what you did, you hadn't done enough. And my dad was so strict. I couldn't stand it. I was had a hard life.

I: Do you want to tell me a little bit about your children?

R: They were good children. Very, very kind. I brought them up with good manners.

I: So even though you had a very hard time you still did a very good job bringing up your children.

R: Yes, they weren't going to be like me.

I: You wanted them to have a happier childhood, yes.

R: If it was my last halfpenny, they could have it. Many a time I've sat with no money in my purse. I wouldn't like to go back. I never had a pair of new shoes. I used to go to second-hand shops. Oh, I was hard up. I don't want to remember now.

I: That's ok. Do you want to tell me something about who your children are and what they do now? What family have you got?

R: Christine's a Comptometer Operator. And my son is a ... What did he do? I don't know what he did. I forgot.

I: That's ok. But they both had a good education?

R: Yes.

I: They went to school?

R: Oh yes, they went to school. They stayed on at school. You know from fourteen to sixteen.

I: They didn't have to go to work like you?

R: No.

I never went anywhere. I don't think I had any new clothes until my children grew up.

I had a terrible bringing up ... My mum couldn't help me because she had I think three boys and two girls after me. I forget all about what I've done and what I haven't done. Or at least I must want to forget. It was so bad.

I: So some of the happy things you've talked about was that your husband was clearly very kind to you?

R: Oh very. He was a baker.

I: He sounds like a great man.

He used to bring me two doughnuts every morning from the bakery.

I: Did he spoil you?

R: Yes.

I: Yes? Deservedly so. You deserved to be spoiled, didn't you.

R: He really loved me.

I: Do you like going back to South Shields?

R: No, I don't. I like Yorkshire best.

I: [Laughter] You're an adopted Yorkshire woman now. A Geordie in Yorkshire.

R: A Geordie Yorkshireman. [Laughter]

I: Do you want to tell me a little bit about what life is like now?

R: It's now much better. [Laughter]

I: Well, you live in a beautiful care home everyone seems very chipper and smiley and happy.

R: Yes, it's lovely.

I: It's in beautiful countryside.

R: That's what I love.

I: You love the countryside?

R: Yes, because mine was the seaside. South Shields, right on the coast.

I: So you're not much of a city girl?

R: No.

I: Neither am I.

R: Are you not?

I: No, I live in Derbyshire. The Peak District.

R: Oh, the Peak District!

I: Yes, all in the hills. With my dogs.

R: It's lovely.

I: It is.

R: I came to Yorkshire ...

I: When did you come to Yorkshire?

- R: My daughter was about ... She'd only be a baby, I think. The little boy would be four.
- I: **Why did you come here?**
- R: I was evacuated.
- I: **Ah ok. What was it like being evacuated?**
- R: That was lovely living in the country.
- I: **So you were evacuated because of the war, but you actually quite liked where you went?**
- R: I loved it.
- I: **So it wasn't a bad thing necessarily?**
- R: No.
- I: **Chrissie, you've said that your life hasn't been a happy one, certainly not during your childhood ...**
- R: The best years of my life was when I got married.
- I: **The happiest?**
- R: And I had children. Babies.
- I: **How do you feel about life now, Chrissie?**
- R: I think it's treated me rough. I've got nothing to gloat about. I've had to work all my childhood. I've worked for some horrible, horrible people. They thought they could get blood out of a stone. No help at all. Not like they get today. I don't like talking about it, that's why I forget where I was.
- I've got a really good family.
- I: **Yes? That's something to be proud of, isn't it?**
- R: It is. And what I couldn't have, they've got. I'm quite happy about that.
- I: **Yes that's a credit to you, isn't it? And they got that because of you. Because of your hard work.**
- R: Oh yes. My son and daughter, they think the world of mum.
- I: **I can tell. They love you very much, don't they? They think you're very special. That's what your daughter said earlier, didn't she? She said, "This is a very special woman". That must be lovely to hear your children say that, to know that they appreciate you?**
- R: Yes. Talk about the best years of your life. I lost mine. But I've always gone out and done charring. It's all I knew. I've sat from Saturday to Monday, all the weekend, not a halfpenny in my purse. No money. Hoping the bread would last out until I got my pension on Monday morning. It wasn't a very nice life.



Fig. 1: Christiane Kirton with a photograph of her husband, John Philip Kirton.

In reply please quote:-

D.N.A. 3/C.S. /DD/4967

and address letter to:-

THE DIRECTOR OF NAVY ACCOUNTS,
(Branch 3),
ADMIRALTY, BATH.

ADMIRALTY,

5 May 1942.

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT

John Philip Kirton

Look. (S)

Official No. C/MX 62679 Royal Navy

is presumed by the Admiralty, for official purposes,
to have died on 1st April 1942 - On War Service.

J. Murray

DIRECTOR OF NAVY ACCOUNTS

3-RCCEB.

Fig. 2: Letter by the Direct of Navy Accounts to Christiane Kirton, informing her of her husband's death. 5 May 1942.

Ref. D.N.A.—Wills 3322

1942



CERTIFICATE OF THE INSPECTOR OF SEAMEN'S WILLS.

ADMIRALTY, the 30th day of *November* 1942.

IN pursuance of Act of Parliament 28th & 29th Vic., cap 111, and Order in Council 28th December, 1865, which provide that the Naval Assets of any deceased COMMISSIONED OFFICER, WARRANT OFFICER, PENSIONER, CIVILIAN, or OTHER PERSON mentioned therein, belonging to or having belonged to a Naval Establishment, when not exceeding One Hundred Pounds, may be paid without Letters of Administration or Probate of Will being taken out, if the claimant's right has been duly investigated and allowed by the Inspector of Seamen's Wills, whose Certificate sanctioning payment is to have the same force and effect as, and the payment on its authority be as valid and conclusive as if made under, Probate or Letters of

NOTE

This Certificate should be carefully kept and not destroyed or mislaid.

Administration; I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THE APPLICATION OF.....

Mrs Christina Agnes Kirton

residing at *18 Cross Street, Upton*

Pontefract, Yorkshire

claiming as *Widow*

*now residing at
128 Emery St
South Shields*

County Durham

*now residing at:-
19 Stevenson Street,
with Shields,
Co. Durham.*

24/1/46

Later address (15/1/55)

*116, Woodlands Road,
Woodlands,
Doncaster,
Yorks.*

the Effects of the late *John Philip Kirton,*

a Cook (S) Royal Navy O.N.

c/MX 62679 who died

intestate on the *1st April 1942.*

has been duly verified and attested as prescribed by the Order in Council, and the statements therein appearing to be true, that the said Claimant is entitled to receive what is due on account of the deceased in the Naval Department (it not exceeding ONE HUNDRED POUNDS), in order to administer the same according to Law.

MISC.
103521

[Signature]

for Inspector of Seamen's Wills.

Description of Effects for which this Certificate is granted.

Amount

Mode and Date of Payment.

Residue of wages
Post War Credit of Wages
WAR GRATUITY.
NAVAL PRIZE MONEY

21 FEB 46
£ s. d.
7 16 9
2 5 6
13 10 -
4 4 -

359578
20 JAN 1943
367597

Fig. 3: Certificate of the Inspector of Seamen's Wills. Issued to Christiane Kirton. 30 November 1942



OFFICE OF ADMIRAL (SUBMARINES)
H.M.S. DOLPHIN,
FORT BLOCKHOUSE,
GOSPORT, HANTS.

10th November 1945.

Dear Mrs. Kirton,

As hostilities have now ceased it is possible to release as much information as is known of the circumstances of the loss of H.M. Submarine PANDORA in which your husband lost his life.

H.M. Submarine PANDORA was bombed by enemy aircraft whilst lying in Malta harbour in 1942, with the loss of nearly half her crew. She had recently arrived from refit in America and had carried out a patrol in the Mediterranean.

It is possible that you have heard nothing further since the first Admiralty notification and I felt it would be a comfort to you to know these few details which I am afraid are all I can give. I would also like to express to you my deepest sympathy, in the loss of your husband, who, by his gallant sacrifice, did so much to ensure our final victory.

Yours sincerely,

Rear Admiral.

Mrs. C. Kirton,
18, Cross Street,
Upton,
Nr. Pontefract.

Fig. 4: Letter notifying Christiane of the details of her husband's death. 10 November 1945.

THE MOST MISERABLE YEARS OF MY LIFE

The war years were the most miserable of my life, I was left a war widow with two babies on April 1st 1942. The tragedy of it all was that my husband joined the Royal Navy voluntarily, he said he had to give our children a better chance in life than we had. If he had only known the hardships we suffered, living in a two room flat with one cold water tap and the toilet down the bottom of the yard, they would have had to drag him into the services.

I never had enough money to buy coal in the winter, so I used to give my next door neighbour $\frac{1}{4}$ lb of margarine for a bucket of coal, then break a few glass jam jars and mix them with the coal so it would last a bit longer. Even then I never lit the fire till tea time, so the children and I sat all day with coats on and drinking hot tea or cocoa and I used to tell them "put your hands round the mug and your hands will get warm" - even today my daughter tells me to warm my hands round a mug of tea and laughs because she remembers.

I used to get my pension on Monday and put my rent, which was nine shillings, away in a glass dish in the cupboard as I didn't pay that till Saturday, of course by then I had nothing left. One Saturday I went for the rent money and to my horror there was only 8-11 $\frac{1}{2}$ ^d. I was $\frac{1}{2}$ ^d short - I was in a panic! The children and I had all the cushions off the three piece, feeling down the sides and backs of the chairs and settee, trying and hoping I would find the halfpenny. The rent collector was a bit annoyed but told me I would have to pay the extra halfpenny the next Saturday.

Then there was the time I only had 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ pence left and needed both bread and soap. What should I buy? I needed them both so badly. Then, my mother came to the rescue, she gave me half of the soap she had and I bought a large loaf, my poor mother came to my rescue many a time!

My father died when he was 49 years old, just one year after my John was lost at sea. I had three brothers in the Forces and two young sisters still at school. My daughter had long hair and wore two ribbons. Every day I washed her ribbons out, folded them and put them under the hot teapot to press as I hadn't the money for the electric iron. All our clothing came from jumble sales or friends, in fact one of my brothers called me "second hand Rose".

My life was so miserable and lonely, my children never went to the swimming baths or pictures, but they knew I just couldn't afford to give them the coppers to go. The only luxury they had was that every Sunday my mother gave my son Ronnie and daughter Christina a 2oz sweet coupon and 3^d each and they bought what they liked. However, we were a happy little family and did everything together, even going to bed myself at the same time as them to save coal and electricity. But I was rewarded the other day when my daughter told me that she had never felt poor, so I guess I must have done a good job bringing them up. They have never caused me any trouble whatsoever, they have both got good jobs and they are very kind to me.

What is this government thinking about? How many one parent families were there during the war and after? They weren't very generous to us, were they? The extra money we have just received came too late. The children should have been compensated, they lost out in a lot of ways in their youth.

Chrissie Kirton.

Fig. 5: Christiane's written version of her life story.



Fig. 6: Christiane Kirton and her husband, John Philip Kirton.

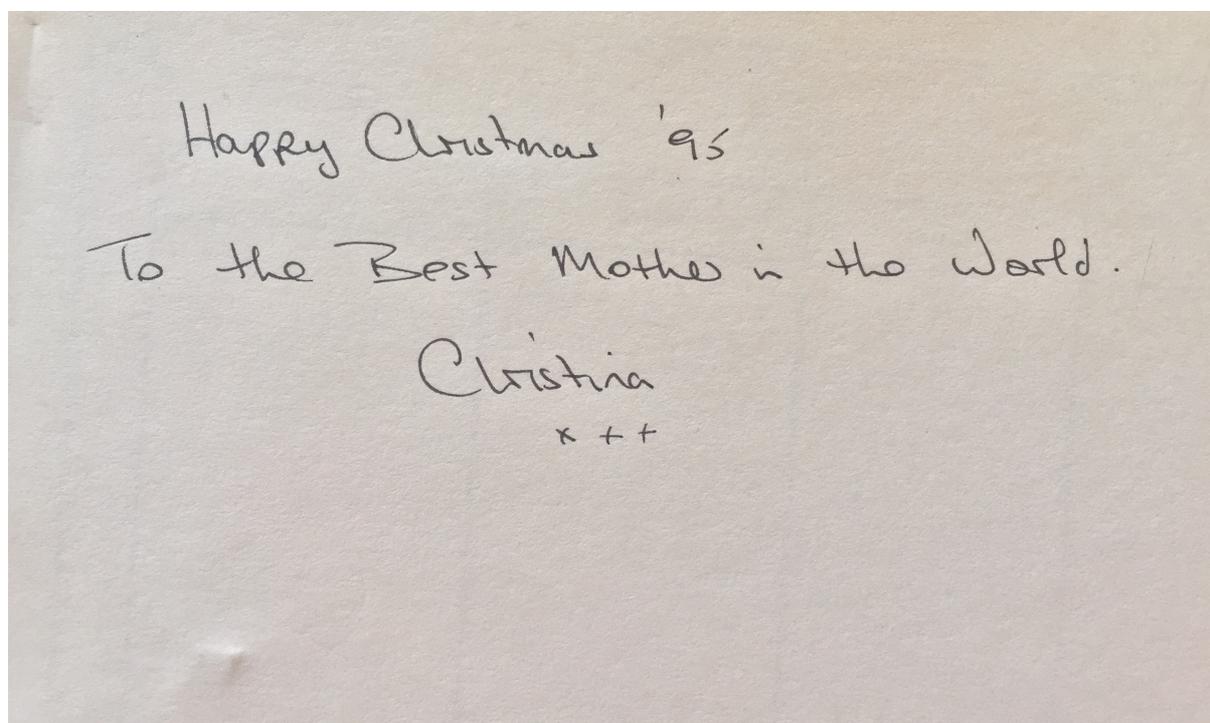


Fig. 7: Dedication in a photo album of Christiane's life that was given to her by her daughter, Christina Claypole, for Christmas 1995.



War Widows' Stories

History. Memories. Heritage.

An Interview with Ruth Maxwell

8 May 2017

Conducted by Nadine Muller



The War Widows'
Association
of Great Britain



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To do so, and for any other questions about this interview, how you may use it, or about the project, please contact Dr Nadine Muller via email (info@warwidowsstories.org.uk), or by post at the following addressing: John Foster Building, Liverpool John Moores University, 80-98 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, L3 5UZ.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

I = Interviewer

R = Respondent / Interviewee

[] = Clarification note

I: So today is the 8th of May 2017. Can you tell me your full name, and your age, and where you live?

R: My name's Ruth Maxwell, I'm getting on for 71, and I live in Hampstead, London.

I: Thank you, Ruth. Ruth, you're the daughter of a war widow. Can you tell us the name of your mother?

R: My mum was called Joyce Mary Maxwell.

I: And can you tell us a bit about your mum's early life?

R: Sure. She was born in 1924, in this part of London as well. We've always lived here. She was the youngest of five children. Her parents were George and Ann Hawkins, and my grandfather worked in a firm of accountants in the City. And my grandmother, who had been born illegitimate, made a very good choice when she married him because she was always very ashamed of being illegitimate, as you can imagine, in Victorian times. They made a good life. They were comfortably off, they had these five children, of whom Joyce was the youngest, and she grew up as a happy child. She was very bright. She was particularly fond of her nearest sibling, who was called Ronnie. He was four years older, and she and Ron were very, very close indeed.

She was sent to a local convent near Belsize Park, where she excelled. She was always very interested in English and history, [which] were her main areas of interest. And she loved going on Hampstead Heath. She was always very interested in nature, and she loved animals. So, she was a good, all-round pupil at school, and she won a scholarship to a grammar school in Euston, called St Aloysius, which was very selective. And she stayed there until she was fifteen. Unfortunately, the war broke out and school was evacuated to Northampton. But my grandmother would not let her go. She was very possessive of my mum. The others had all grown up and gone to work but my mum was left at home, and Granny didn't want her to leave. Which was a terrible disappointment to her because her plan was to go to university and study history, get a degree.

So, reluctantly ... well, she had no choice, really ... she stayed at home and Granny found a local woman who was a shorthand-typist, who lived down the road. And she sent

Mum down the road to this woman, who taught her secretarial skills – shorthand, typing, and all the rest of it, which she took to like a duck to water, actually.

Then, as soon as she could – I suppose she must have been about sixteen or seventeen – she got a job in the Civil Service with various war offices, the War Office, I think it was, where she became part of a pool of typists who ... they were kind of mobile. She was sent around from one office to another, typing up war documents and top-secret stuff, I suppose, down in Whitehall, and various other places like that. And she always said that it was really creepy, she often had to work on a Saturday. And she said it was dark and damp and smelly, and there were rats and sandbags, and it wasn't nice at all. And then she had quite a long journey home on a bus, probably in an air-raid from time to time, to get back to Hampstead.

And, in the end, she became ill. I'm not actually sure what she had but she was diagnosed with pleurisy definitely, and possibly TB. But wartime conditions were very difficult; there was the blackout, food was rationed, they had to spend quite a lot of time in the cellar, I think, during air-raids. And, I suppose, her immune system got pretty battered, and what with all this heavy, you know, this work she was doing down in Whitehall and in various offices around London, and getting home late, her health suffered. She ended up being sent to a hospital out in Berkshire, and it's called Ashridge. Now, Ashridge is the most beautiful country pile set in the Downs in Berkshire.³⁰ It was requisitioned by the government, actually, initially for people who'd been bombed out in London and in cities, who had been injured or who had become ill, or had nervous breakdowns, or whatever, as a recuperation and convalescence place. And for anyone else who, like mum, had got a, you know, a chest infection or chest complaint, or pleurisy or TB, or any of those things, pneumonia.

So, Mum was sent off there, into the wilds, to this absolutely beautiful country house. It was an estate with huge grounds. And then there were extra outdoor wards, where she spent quite a long time having what they called that 'fresh air treatment'. There were no antibiotics. I think antibiotics were discovered during the war, but I don't think they were freely available when she had this dreadful, dreadful chest infection. Plus the fact, she caught hepatitis from one of the doctors. The doctor died and Mum was at death's door. And I remember, she told us her parents were called up to the hospital in the middle of the night, possibly because she was going to die.

But anyway, she was a hell of a fighter and she recuperated from, recovered from the hepatitis, and from the pleurisy, TB [Tuberculosis], having spent six months sleeping on a veranda in the open air, which was the treatment for it in those days – open air! So, she was on the veranda of a hospital ward, along with lots of other people with chest ailments, for six months, in the winter and everything. And she did recover. But she was young, and she was strong.

I: How old was she then, Ruth?

R: She would have been 20-ish, I would imagine, around 20. Well, this would have been in 1944 because between 1944 and 1945 my father was a prisoner of war, well, for longer than that. He was captured in North Africa, by the Italians, actually, at Tobruk. And then he was imprisoned in Italy for quite a while. Then, when Italy was liberated by the Americans and British, instead of giving orders to the POWs [prisoners of war] to get out, they told them to stay put. Whereupon, the Germans quickly invaded Italy and took over all the POWs that the Italians had been imprisoning, and carted them all off to Poland in a cattle truck. So he ended up, when he could probably have escaped in Italy,

³⁰ Respondent correction: Ashridge is set in the Chiltern Hills, not the Downs.

going to Poland. Which, I believe, was a very well-known route for prisoners of war who were caught up in the North African campaign. So he spent a couple of years in a POW camp in Poland, not far from Krakow and not far from Auschwitz, in fact, where life was extremely brutal and harsh.

Then, in the winter of '44/ '45, the Germans told the prisoners that they must get ready to mobilise at any minute. So this would be, say, December '44. But they were not told what was going to happen to them. So, at some point in December '44, the prisoners were all mobilised and marshalled together and marched out of the camp, in one of the bitterest winters for years and years in central Europe, I suppose. They didn't know where they were going, and they really only had the clothes that they stood up in. And their guards didn't really know where they were going, either. In fact, there's a film based on it, called 'The Long March to Freedom', I don't know whether you've seen it, but it's very good. A lot of those men, who are probably dead now, were interviewed.

They marched them across Europe with no supplies, no food, nothing to drink. The men dropped dead on the spot, or they were shot, or they just collapsed and they were left. They had to dig up root vegetables, if they could even, you know, manage to dig [them] up from the soil that was frozen hard. They slept in barns, in fields, wherever the Germans told them they had to spend the night. And they were infested with lice, they had dysentery. Half of them died en-route. They'll never really know how many people died en-route. They met up with other groups of refugees and Jewish people, who were being marched out of concentration camps. You know, there were huge lines of people marching across Europe at that time. And very often, well, not often, but they were strafed by the RAF, who didn't know who they were. They just thought they were lines of German troops. So some of them died because they were shot by machine gun fire from aeroplanes. It was hell.

And eventually, when the Germans surrendered in the Spring of 1945, he and whoever else was alive were liberated by the Americans, I think, and taken to camps and cleaned up, deloused, and repatriated to this country.

Anyway, Dad ended up in this Ashridge Hospital; because there were so many of these POWs being rescued, they had to find places to put them. So, although it was a civilian hospital, for a while it became a military hospital for repatriated POWs. So all the time my mum and my dad were in this hospital together but I don't think they actually fraternised, you know, the troops wouldn't fraternise with the civilians. Until, sometime, now I'm not quite sure about this, there was a celebration to mark the end of the war. And anyone in the hospital, be they civilian or military, as long as they could get out of bed and walk, was invited to this dance, in this fabulous ballroom. I've visited Ashridge so I've seen it; it's absolutely spectacular. It's a business centre now, but it really is a beautiful place, this massive ballroom.

And I guess that's where they first met, at this ball or this celebration, and they hit it off straightaway. But mum, who was now better, was fed up with being incarcerated in this place, and she decided, maybe against the hospital's advice, I don't know, that she was going to discharge herself and go home because she'd been there for a long time and she felt well, and she was bored, I suppose. So, despite the fact that she had met my dad, it was only, you know, sort of the first seeds of romance that had been sown. And I guess, also, that she never left him any of her details.

Now, I'm going to digress here a bit because we had no idea, until I was in my 50s, that Mum had this bunch of letters that they had written to each other – had absolutely no idea that she had these letters. She kept them all those years. And they are very, very interesting because they map out their courtship, which was very, very rapid, actually.

What happened was that my father died in 1950, and he had very few possessions because (a) he'd been in the Army since 1932, I think; he was a regular soldier. And (b) my dad and his siblings had been born in India, they were Anglo-Indian, which is something else I discovered fairly recently by doing research into my father's side of the family, of which I knew absolutely nothing. Dad had been orphaned in India when he was about nine, and sent to a Baptist missionary orphanage in Orissa, which is below Calcutta, on the eastern side of India.

For some unknown reason, although he had a fairly big family, I guess, on both sides of the family, nobody seemed to want him and his two sisters. They were bunged into this orphanage, and there he stayed until he was a young man. He left school at eighteen with various education qualifications. One of his sisters had died in the orphanage, and his other sister remained in the orphanage and eventually married.

So, Dad, when he was demobbed, he probably just about had the clothes he stood up in. And Mum had a little box, which I have, actually, in the cupboard, of bits and bobs that belonged to him. And that was all she had after he died, apart from his clothes. So, there was this bunch of letters that they had written in-between Mum leaving the hospital, discharging herself and going home, and Dad being discharged from hospital and then going back into the Army. He was stationed at a military camp somewhere, I think, in Oxford or Newbury, or somewhere.

Anyway, we came by these letters quite accidentally when my father's sister, who'd come to live in England in the 1960s with her husband, decided I think that her husband had got into trouble in Calcutta. He was a customs officer. He was very shady and not very nice. And I think they had to get out of India fast, so they came here. And she lived a long way away from us. She lived in Essex. No, Suffolk. She had nothing to do with us, although we were her only blood relatives, her two nieces and my brother, her nephew. And she and Mum kept in touch by letter, but she only came to visit us once. Of course, she would have been a mine of information. I would have loved to have talked to her about India and about what had happened. But, of course, you know, you don't want to do these things until you're much older, by which time she was dead.

So, when we got the news that Florence (that was her name) had died, my sister and I said, "I wonder if she's got any belongings of Dad. Any photographs, any letters," you know. "Did she bring them from India? And we'd love ... We have so little of our father's, we'd love to know". So Jean and I decided to go to Suffolk to see if we could retrieve anything from her husband, who, by that time, was sort of, well, he was a bit demented, and he was an alcoholic. So we had no luck there, and we came home empty-handed.

And then Mum said, "Oh, I feel terrible. You've gone all the way up there, and you've come back with nothing". Because the house, I can't tell you how ghastly it was. It was like a bomb had gone off in it. So, she [my mother] said, "Look," she said, "I just feel I should let you know this, and I'm going to give you these now", she said. "I was going to ask for them to be cremated with me, but I want you to have them". And she produced this wad of letters which documented their entire courtship, from the end of their stay in hospital to their preparations for marriage, which was only a few months, anyway.

The first letter was from my father to her, and because he didn't know where she lived, he'd sent it to "care of the hospital" and asked them to forward it. And it just said, "I really enjoyed our time at the hospital. I expect you're going to be very surprised when you get this letter but I'd really like to meet up in London when I'm on my next leave. Would you like to meet for a drink?" The post must have been marvellous in those days because it was literally every couple of days [that] these letters were going backwards and forwards. My mother said, "Well, you could have knocked me down with a feather", which was one

of her favourite expressions. "I don't know what to say, but, yes, I would like to meet you". And so they arranged to meet.

These letters went on and on for several months, during which my father was taken back into hospital because he was only going in for a minor operation, very minor, to have something, a wart or something, removed. Something, you know, not important. While he was in there, they did a lot of tests on him, and in those days, of course, they wouldn't tell you what they were doing. They kept testing his urine all the time, he said, "They won't let me out because they keep testing my urine all the time". I guess they'd found protein or albumen in it, and they were trying to find out what was wrong.

So, by that time, he'd asked her to marry him,³¹ not by letter, or if he did, that's not there, that particular letter, and they agreed they were going to get married as soon as he could get out of the hospital. So Mum had to do all the arrangements for the marriage and also go up and visit him in this military hospital in Oxford. And it must have been quite something, you know, post-war trains and she was working, and she was having to arrange for a flat. Plus, the furniture, there's all sorts of stuff about furniture in [the letters], and pricing of furniture. It was all utility furniture in those days. And then she had to go to see the priest and arrange everything. And he [dad] wrote in one of his letters, "Oh, I feel such a heel. You're doing all this running around and here am I stuck in the hospital, and I can't do anything".

It seemed to me that, quite suddenly, he was discharged. Because one of the letters says, "Oh, I can't wait to come to London and then we can go and buy the ring, and we'll be together". Now, reading between the lines, Jean and I, my sister, decided that they realised he had something possibly fatal, but they weren't telling him. I think that, in those days, if you had a fatal illness they would probably discharge you and not tell you that maybe you only had a few years to live. That's my perception. So, I think that, at the end of the day, they didn't really know what was wrong with him, and they certainly didn't tell either my father or my mother. He was just discharged and he could get on with getting married and setting up a home, and all the things he wanted to do. Because, obviously, as a child and a young man, for most of his adult life, he hadn't had any of that. So that's what they did. And they married on December 26th 1945, having met in the spring of 1945. So it was all very sudden.

I: How old was your father then?

R: Dad? He was quite a lot older than mum. He was fourteen years older than mum. So Mum would have been 21, something like that. He was in his mid-30s when they married.

I: And what was his full name?

R: William Edward Maxwell.

I: So, they met in hospital, in the countryside. One, your dad because of the direct, pretty traumatic impact of the war –

R: Yes, yes.

I: And your mother because of the more, I suppose, indirect impact of the war–

R: Yes, correct, yes. Yes, that's right.

³¹ See Fig. 2.

I: So, they got married at the very end of 1945. At the end of the war –

R: Boxing Day, yes.

I: Ah, right. Okay, Boxing Day of 1945. And tell me how it went from there ...

R: Well, first of all they lived in Peabody Buildings. It's off Drury Lane. Dad had two elderly aunts. They'd been born in India. My family on his side goes back a very long way ... until at least 1805, I haven't got any further back than that ... The two aunts, Alice and Leah, were his aunts, so were his sister's [mother's] two older sisters. They had married military men in their late teens in India and eventually come to live in England. And they were his only relatives, apart from his sister in India, in Calcutta.

Well, they were absolutely lovely, these two old aunts. They were widows, the pair of them, and they lived in a little tiny flat in this Peabody Buildings. They must have managed to help him get a flat in the same block, or nearby. We subsequently visited them when we were little and we were fascinated by them because they were very quaint. They were like two maiden aunts, two old spinsters, who, in fact, had both been married to soldiers. But they both had very strong Indian accents. And we were fascinated by these accents. They were very lilting and sing-song.

I don't think Mum realised – because she was very, very deaf; my mother was profoundly deaf – that ... I don't think she would have recognised this Indian accent. But we, as children, thought it was hilarious, you know. We were fascinated. And we used to mimic them. They were absolutely lovely. So kind and ... genteel is the word I would use to describe them.

Anyway, Mum and Dad got this flat in the Peabody Buildings after the war, and it was very sparsely furnished and very cold and a bit grim-looking. And they settled down there. But my gran missed her terribly and, of course, all the other children were gone and married and had children, and so on. So she worked on Mum very, very hard to come back and live at the family home, which is just up the road from here, in Constantine Road.

And so, my parents discussed it, but my mum was not really keen on it because my grandparents were very unhappily married. And they used to fight and argue and shout at each other a lot. I mean, it wasn't physical, but it was certainly unhappy, and they did argue a lot. And Mum was embarrassed about it. So my father said, "Look, it's got nothing to do with us, we're going to be living upstairs, let them get on with it, for God's sake, they're not going to change." He was probably well aware that they were always at it hammer and tongs.

I think Mum would have preferred to have gone home anyway. So basically what happened was that she and Dad moved into the middle part of the house, and Granny and Grandad lived downstairs. And then there was a curmudgeonly old aunt of my grandmother's who lived on the top floor of the house. That's what people did in those days: they all squashed up, didn't they, you know, families? Especially after the war.

And within nine months of their marriage, probably almost to the day, I was born.

I: So that would be in ... ?

R: September 1946. And then my brother and sister were born in quick succession.³² There's just sort of barely two years between the three [each] of us. And Dad got a job in the Civil Service, just as a clerk, initially. Because before he joined the Army in India, in-between leaving school and joining the Army, he had worked as a clerk in the post office in northern India. So, he managed to get a job in some service, some department of the civil service, I'm not sure what. So he got a job quickly. Mum was at home with me. Then David came along.

And then, it must have been between David and my sister, Mum said he started to get these absolutely terrible headaches. Really, really horrific. Like migraines, she said. Where he was absolutely, you know, he couldn't cope, he vomited and he couldn't go to work. He was just incapable of doing anything until they passed. And they just got more frequent and closer together. Well, he was incapacitated by these headaches, like, I don't know if you've ever had a migraine. I've had one and you know how debilitating they are. Well, these were dreadful because, I mean, he, you know, he needed to work and he had a young family. And I'm quite sure he was used to hard work and he didn't want to be spending time at home, you know, recovering from them. Oh, sometimes they were accompanied by nose bleeds, I remember her saying. Anyway, apparently one day he arrived on the doorstep during the daytime, and Mum let him in, and he just, I think she said, he vomited, and there was blood. A lot of blood. And he just collapsed. And obviously, whatever was wrong with him was extremely serious. So, [eventually] he was rushed off to the hospital and never came out again.

Now, my mum was pregnant with Jean, so this must have come on between David's birth and Jean's arrival. So, I believe that he would have been in the hospital during the winter of 1949. Jean was born in 1950. June 1950. Well, Mum was heavily pregnant. The hospital where Dad was, at the top of Hampstead, [was] up a very steep hill. There was no way of getting up. There were no buses or anything in those days. And, eventually, he was so ill that when the hospital needed her to come to his bedside, they would send a police car for her to take her up there.

And there was nothing they could do because he had advanced renal failure. Obviously, you know, if it had happened later they would have been able to help him with dialysis. But, I mean, his kidneys were destroyed and he, I would guess, died an extremely ghastly and painful death. And all the time, Mum was hoping he'd get better. Although I have a Christmas card from her to him, either a Christmas card or a birthday card, because his birthday was in February - I can't remember [what card it was], saying, you know, "I can't wait for you to come out of the hospital so we can be a family again". And it's a very sweet little card and, you know, it just makes me feel really tearful.

So anyway, he died on April 3rd 1950. I never saw him again. I don't remember him going into the hospital. It's all a blank, actually. I can remember the day of the funeral quite clearly. I would have been ... well ... his funeral would have been in April, and I would have been four in September. So I was, yes, 3½, or something. I can remember that day very clearly indeed. I can remember a bit about his illness because I was often not allowed into the room. I was told I was not allowed in there, and I had to sit outside. I can remember that. I can remember being outside of a room and not allowed to go in because there was a lot of blood. This was before he went in. I can remember that.

I: So this was at home?

R: This was at home, yes, prior to his going into the hospital. This was at home. And I think my mother said that this old aunt – well, she wasn't that old at that time, she was probably

³² See Fig. 3.

60-ish – inadvertently did let me into the room. And I saw a whole load of stuff I shouldn't have seen, and I was absolutely traumatised by it.

So all of that is a bit of a blank. I expect I probably wiped it out of my mind. But the funeral ... Of course, in those days children didn't go to funerals. David would have only been two anyway. I mean, he was a baby. And I remember Mum going out of the house in a black dress, and I remember a big black car outside. My grandmother was looking out of the window, so Granny didn't go to the funeral because she had to look after us. And I was trying to get away from my grandmother. She was holding me really tightly, and I was screaming and shouting, and my mother was leaving the house, getting into this car in a black dress. I remember looking through the net curtains, with my grandmother holding on to me for dear life, and I was trying to get out of her clutches and get out of the front door and follow my mother. I remember that very clearly indeed.

I was absolutely traumatised by the whole experience because my father literally disappeared out of my life. And Mum said I was absolutely the apple of his eye. I was his first child. He'd had this horrific experience of being a prisoner of war. He'd had a ghastly childhood, more or less abandoned by his family in India, no-one knows why, but the three of them brought up in this orphanage, having to make his way in the world. Probably the only family he really had was when he was in the Army, because that's what some of these men were to each other. And I was the first thing, apart from mum, that he had that belonged to him. And she said she just let him, you know, take me over. He and I were just absolutely devoted to each other. And then, one minute he was there, and the next minute he wasn't. So, you know, I felt abandoned.

Of course, I didn't realise all this at the time. I had no idea. I was bereft. I used to sit on the stairs and wait for him to come in the door, and have terrible tantrums. Mum didn't know what to do with me. She had David, who was just a little baby, and she was expecting Jean at any minute. I mean, my grandmother was marvellous, you know. My grandparents just said, "Well, don't worry about paying any rent. This is your home. Don't worry. This is your home for as long as you want it to be". Granny looked after us, although she was actually getting on as well because she didn't have Mum until she was in her 40s – about '41 or '42, or something like that. So, she wasn't a spring chicken. But anyway, she was my mother's mainstay for a long time.

So, I was totally and utterly devastated and traumatised, and I do remember that period of my life. I do remember sitting on the stairs and crying and screaming. I wouldn't let my mother out of my sight. It must have been a nightmare, the whole thing. There was no bereavement counselling. There was nothing, absolutely nothing. You just had to get on with it. That's what we all did.

I: Do you remember if your mother told you that your father had died?

R: Well, yes. Well, I don't remember in so many words, but yes. But what do you know of death when you're 3½, you know? Nothing, I suppose. I mean, you might see a dead cat or a dead insect or something, but you have no concept of death or the fact that your parent isn't going to come back. That's something you learn as, you know, you absorb and you learn as you get older. I just don't know what words she used to describe it to me. I just don't remember. I mean, a lot of it would be due to the fact that I was too little, that I had absolutely no experience or any way of being able, any language to be able to describe how I felt. I would imagine I felt, well I know now, I felt very angry indeed. And it affected my life well into adulthood, and my relationships with men, particularly.

So obviously, children do get over these things to a degree, but it makes its mark. And although you get on with your life and you... my childhood I remember as being very

happy, actually. So there, that says it all, doesn't it? Mum had her family around her, her parents, and she had a sister and a brother who lived locally. And she also had a family to bring up. So, in time, things got better in some ways.

Anyway, when Jean was about to be born, she didn't book herself into the hospital. She didn't dare. Because I would scream and shout and be distressed if she was out of my sight for five minutes, she decided ... Well, she had us all at home, anyway, so she obviously planned for the midwife to come in when Jean was on the way. And anyway, Granny was downstairs, and she'd had five children, plus a couple of miscarriages. So, you know, she'd have been alright in that department.

Jean was born the 13th June, so she decided she would get David and me to bed on the evening of 12th June. No, hang on ... Yes, that's right. I know Jean was born ... it must have been in the early hours of 12th [13th] June. Anyway, it turned out that Mum left it all too late before she told my gran and before they could get the midwife. Because Jean was born on the stairs, on the staircase, at Number 6.

When we got up, when David and I got up, probably by my grandmother, it was to discover we had a new sister. So, I do remember that. I remember being outside the room. I suppose Granny and the midwife were tidying up, and then we went in. I remember that. And it was a lovely June summer morning and there was this new baby. From then on, I became a sort of mini-parent, at the age of four. I mentioned before that Mum was deaf. She'd gone deaf in her late teens, actually. Probably a genetic thing because my grandad was deaf and he had three children who were deaf. So, she lost her hearing on one side completely, and she could hear, and she could lip-read. And I think that really affected her with regard to her being a woman, and her attractiveness. She was never a victim of her deafness. I mean, she was not a victim person per se or full stop. She just got on with things and took whatever was thrown at her. She was a very, very strong woman, and I can't understand, and neither can any of us, how she just didn't buckle under the strain of it all and completely, you know, give up and have a nervous breakdown. But she never did.

When Dad and Mum met, I think he must have been a very kind man. Because although she was deaf, very deaf, and I think, as a young woman, you know, that would affect your feeling of being attractive, wouldn't it? If you couldn't hear what someone was saying to you, you would feel you were unattractive in some way. Especially as you had to wear a big, heavy, ugly hearing aid, which they were. I don't know whether you've ever seen a vintage hearing aid, but they're very, very ugly contraptions with wires and things dangling down. And, you know, you couldn't hide them. And you had to wear a big earpiece and sometimes a, well, a big battery attached to your chest. I mean, it was horrible – like a walkie-talkie, almost.

So, I think Dad must have been an inherently understanding and sympathetic man, because they fell in love very quickly and her deafness didn't seem to bother him at all. But I did think, she would never say, but I think it affected her womanliness. I just think it would. She never married again and she actually did say – and I think that's terribly sad – she said, “Well, no-one's going to be interested in me, being deaf and having three children. Who would be interested in me, or find me attractive?” And that was, you know, it was just factual, the way she said it. It wasn't like, in a victim way, it was, “Well, that's life,” you know. “Who's going to find me attractive? No-one”. So she never remarried and, as far as I know, she didn't have any boyfriends at all. She concentrated on us and her job.

I had to be her ears and, obviously, David was too little, he was only two, so I had to listen out for all sorts of things, like doorbells and the other two crying, especially Jean.

And, in time, the telephone. I don't think we had a phone until I was quite a bit older. I mean, people didn't have fridges, and phones, and washing machines in those days.

So, in time, she had to decide how she was going to make a living. I can't remember her doing all that much before I went to school. I think my going to school was some kind of watershed, when she felt she ought to start doing something about making a living. I remember my first few days at school and they were traumatic. I was rising five. I went to the local convent, and, actually, it was the same one she'd been educated in, Belsize Park. It was post-war, there were between forty and fifty children to a class. It was strict – it was a convent. The first day I went [laughter], I remember having to be dragged, kicking and screaming, across the playground by my mum and a nun. Because I didn't want Mum out of my sight, and that was it. I wasn't going to go to school, and that was it. I was going to stay at home.

But that passed. When I realised, you know, that my mum and my siblings were not going to disappear out of my life, that passed. So I settled down to school, and I absolutely loved it, and I did well. I really, really liked my primary school years, and they were happy, and I had loads of friends. And the education was second to none.

Mum decided that she was going to set up a typing business, so she put out a few feelers and put postcards up in newsagents and maybe in the local paper. I suppose she sort of became a PA to various people. Because we lived in Hampstead, it's chock-a-block full of film stars, and actors, and writers, and eminent people, and wealthy people as well. So she started off in a small way becoming a PA to one or two people who needed someone to type letters and do a bit of light housework. So that's what she did.

She gradually built up a very, very thriving business working for all sorts of people, academics mostly, authors. She got a job with the University of London typing manuscripts. I mean, they were huge. They were manuscripts, they were all written by hand. They were not typed or anything. Sometimes they had bits of typing where, you know, people had crossed stuff out and handwritten a bit and stuck it on with Sellotape. I mean, they were complicated. And she had to decipher people's handwriting. She would work long, long hours often into, well, mostly into the night when we were in bed. We would go to sleep to the sound of her typewriter in the next room.

When she'd done the manuscript, with lots of copies, usually, she often went to the university binders to have it bound. And that's how she made her money. It was long, hard hours, often long into the night, sitting on a rickety chair in front of the typewriter, bashing away at the keys. If we wanted something, if we were ill, like if we had the flu or tonsillitis or chicken pox or measles, we would sit up in her bed. She'd make us up a bed in her room, because her workroom, as we called it, doubled up as her bedroom as well. So we would be in bed, she would be sitting beside us, typing. Your leg could be hanging off or you could have a broken arm, but you were not supposed to talk to her until she got to the end of the page. So we would be standing beside her with some dire emergency going on whilst she'd be bashing away at the keys, watching this page, you know, getting longer and longer. And when she'd finished the page, we'd say, "mum!" you know [laughter]. "So-and-so's fallen down the stairs," or something. Or, "The cat's escaped into the road". [Laughter.] So that was our lives.

I: So this was in the early to late 1950s?

R: In the '50s and '60s, yes.

I: Okay. So essentially, then, after your father's death, your Mum managed to make a living with what she had done –

R: Previously, yes.

I: – before she went into hospital. When she was sixteen, you said, she was a typist.

R: Yes, yes.

I: **And you said she obviously had the support of her parents and her grandparents because she could live there for free.**

R: That's right.

I: **So she had very good family support –**

R: Very, yeah.

I: – once your father went into hospital and died.

R: Yes, sure.

I: **Did you have a sense of any other support? The wider community? Government? You've said already that there was no bereavement counselling ...**

R: No, there was nothing. Dad's Army pension died with his death. Although he was a regular, she didn't get his Army pension. The War Widows' Pension was taxed, so this is what –

I: **At 50% ...**

R: Yes. It was an enormous amount of tax. So she got a widow's pension and a War Widows' Pension, which were miniscule because of the tax. That is why the War Widows' Association was founded in the first place – I expect you know about all that – and she was a founder member. By which time, I'd grown up, I was grown up and had a child, you know, for God's sake. So all these war widows scattered around all over the country had their hands tied behind their backs, because they were so busy scratching a living and trying to bring up their families. So they actually couldn't go into action until their families were grown up.

She would not accept what she called charity. Oh, she had the Family Allowance as well, which probably wasn't very much, but she had that. She wouldn't accept anything like benefits or the dole, she wouldn't have heard about it. And we were all brought up in the, you know, we wouldn't be doing that either. We would get educated and we would get a job and that would be it, and you wouldn't be going on the dole or anything like that. That was shameful. And I agree with her, actually.

So she got what was due to her and she gradually built up a business which, although not well-paid, was enough to support her and us. I don't think my grandparents gave her anything. My grandad may have done but... obviously, if she'd have been absolutely desperate, well, yes of course, they would have done. But she was very independent and I don't suppose she would have wanted to accept anything from them. But I mean, she'd have had to have been desperate before she would have done. So she did support us, and she supported us very well. And she managed to get the money together every single year, while we were growing up until we were in our teens, to go away on holiday once a year. We always went away to somewhere like Dorset or Sussex, and she would rent a caravan or a little self, you know, a little flat, a self-catering place. But we always went, and we'd take the dog with us. And, you know, we had as normal a life as possible.

I was the oldest and expected to look after the other two, a lot – which was difficult because, you know, I think it did rob me of part of my childhood. I had to be this sort of pseudo mini-parent. She didn't say as much, but I think once, when I was older, she said, "Oh, I felt very guilty about making you do so much when you were little." But I had to, as I say, we had to listen out for the phone; we had to answer the phone. I had to speak to her clients. I had to take work, finished manuscripts, she would give me the finished manuscript and say, "Take it to so-and-so."

So, I would go and visit all these extremely well-to-do houses of authors and various playwrights, and various people with their plays, and I would be entrusted with the manuscript, to take it to somebody's house. Which I enjoyed, actually. It's nice going into these posh houses and seeing how they all lived [laughter]. And they were all very nice people as well, very kind. She had quite a relationship with a very well-known children's author, called Eleanor Farjeon. I don't know whether you've ever heard of her. She's a very well-known children's author in the '50s and she lived in a beautiful cottage in a very, very nice part of Hampstead, tucked away down a little mews. And I used to take Eleanor Farjeon's manuscripts back to her. I loved going to Eleanor Farjeon's house, I absolutely loved it, and she was so kind. She was supportive to mum, she really was, and Mum made a friend of her. I still have a few books of Eleanor Farjeon's that she signed and dedicated to me, which are probably worth quite a bit of money now. But I'm not going to sell them. [Laughter].

So yeah, Mum always found time to take us out, take us on Hampstead Heath for picnics, let our friends come 'round and play, to take us around London. Mum was a Londoner, she loved London, and she was interested in, well, she loved history. So she would take us to all sorts of historical places. And she educated us, so we could find our way around on public transport. We knew about places like Hampton Court, the Tower of London, Kew Gardens, the history of places. She wrote several little histories of the area, which I still have, which were published. She was a very interesting woman, very well-educated and she was fun, she had a great sense of humour.

Although her life was dogged by ill-health because, I mean, she had all this dreadful arthritis with sitting at this chair all the time, typing. She got terrible, terrible osteoarthritis, and I'm sure that was to do with it. And she had problems with her gynaecological bits because, I suppose, she'd had three children really quickly, she got endometriosis. She wanted to have a hysterectomy and, because the gynaecological departments of hospitals in those days were led by crusty old men, you know, wearing wing collars and, you know, monocles, they wouldn't let her have a... She needed a hysterectomy and they said, "No, you can't have one, you're still of childbearing years," was what they said to her. She was furious but, you know, she was at their mercy.

Finally, she did. When we were adult she had the hysterectomy because her uterus and her gynaecological bits had always caused her a lot of trouble – not exactly illness but, you know, she should have had that operation years and years before. But they would not allow it. And as she said, "Well, I don't want any more children, I've got three children, why would I want any more? I'm a widow, why would I want any more children?" But no, no-one would listen to her.

So, all this took a huge toll on her health and she just battled through, she battled through it. I mean, sometimes, once or twice, she had to go into hospital, so Jean, David, and I were farmed out to various of her siblings. I remember when I was fifteen, we were going to go away on holiday somewhere and Mum had to go into hospital. I can't remember what it was for, now. It could have been for the hysterectomy. Anyway, we all got farmed out to various uncles and aunts. And that was the first time I got taken abroad, when I was fifteen. I just loved that; I went to France, and it was so exciting, with her eldest

brother and his wife. They were actually very well-off. He was a bank manager. So I went to France with them and that was great.

Mum battled and battled, and she would never let, you know, the buggers get her down. She just battled through the whole lot with self-will and determination, actually.

Can we have a little break?

I: Of course. Okay.

I: Right. So Ruth, you told that clearly it was traumatic and difficult for you to lose your father –

R: Very, yes.

I: – at so early an age. And I wondered if you have any recollections of how your mother dealt with it at the time. Did you ever think that she was angry, frustrated, or ... ?

R: Well, I think Mum was very angry underneath all of it. Mum came from a Victorian background, my grandparents were Victorians, and they were very straitlaced and controlled. You didn't speak about your emotions. Emotions were all to be swept away under the carpet and you had to keep everything under control. And I think that's how a lot of people of my parents' generation were brought up. Well, in fact, we all know that they kept their emotions well buttoned-down.

So, Mum was very young, she was 26 when all this happened, and she was obviously very much in love with my father. Because they'd only been married for five years and they'd had this incredibly whirlwind romance. And she was as traumatised as I was, not to mention my brother. I've got no idea what effect it had on my brother because, well, that's another story that I might talk about later. She kept it all battened down, the grief and the bereavement. She said that she would wake up in the morning and her pillow would be soaking wet from tears. But during the day we never saw it. She obviously just had to put it to one side and get on.

There were one or two occasions, when I was little, when I saw my mum cry – well, the three of us actually, but I can only remember the effect it had on me. If I saw my mum become tearful or cry, and she was at the end of her tether, at her wits' end, sometimes, with three children, you know, and all that. And, you know, we were certainly not paragons of virtue; we squabbled and fought and were naughty and got up to things, just like all other children. And she literally, literally was at the end of her tether, sometimes. She would occasionally lose control, but very occasionally. And I have seen her cry. And the minute she started to cry, the three of us would start wailing because it was so unusual to see Mum cry or break down or get tearful or emotional. We couldn't cope with it. And she knew that, so she kept it all in, the lot, and she hardly ever let that go. She always kept the lid on it.

Because I can remember I couldn't bear to see it. I just didn't know what to do. I just became a sort of tearful little wreckage. And you know when kids get the [sobbing noise], they sob like that, you know, lose their breath and get out of control. That's how I would get. And she didn't want me to be like that, or any of us, so she kept it all in. But I know it must have been terribly hard for her. And obviously, when we were all in bed and asleep, she did let go. She told us that.

She was a very controlled woman. She didn't think much of emotive displays, she didn't have any time for it, actually, she just didn't have any time for it, she just used to, you know, just sort of flap it away. She just couldn't. She was an emotional woman who kept it all in, and she was a passionate woman as well, but it was all kept very securely under lock and key. But as she got older, she was strict. She was a strict parent. She was a kind parent and a fair parent, but my goodness, she was strict – and she had to be. We would get a wallop if we stepped too far out of line, and we did. Children got smacked in those days, anyway, but we had to watch our p's and q's, and if we pushed her too far we would be put over her lap and given a good smack. So she was a strict parent but she was not cruel or unkind, she was very fair. She was very liberal and tolerant, actually. An educated, intelligent woman, who, you know, driven too far, would snap, as we all would.

But Jean and I agree that she did soften, and she did talk about things more freely. She never burst into tears. She wasn't given to bursting into tears, and neither am I, actually. But I suppose, we were all, you know, brought up in a school of hard knocks, really. So, we learned to be tough, you know. You had to be tough, and that's learned behaviour.

Anyway, we realised that, although she didn't discuss it very much, we all realised that we, as children growing up, we were different. I felt very different at school when I was growing up because we didn't have a dad, and I always felt different. It just marks you, it marks you out that you didn't have a dad, and therefore you were different to everybody else because parents didn't divorce or separate very much in the '50s and there were not many single parents around. Mum was different: (a) because she was widowed, and (b) because she was deaf. And that made us all feel different and set apart in some ways from other children who had more conventional upbringings, and a Mum and a dad, and we didn't. I always felt the loss of my father, and still do, you know. It's never, never gone away.

I can't remember a time when, you know, I mean, it's affected my relationships with, certainly my first husband. I mean, my first husband was actually old enough to be my father. I married a father figure, which was about the last thing I should have done. And Mum wouldn't have wanted me to marry him but, of course, what can you do? You can't stop your children doing things that you know are not going to work out and going to be disastrous, which it was. And you can't lock them up, and you can't threaten them. They just go their own sweet way and then realise what a ghastly mistake they've made. And that's precisely what happened to me.

I did marry a man – I was 22 or 23 – [who] was 46, you know. I mean, it was classic, wasn't it, you know? Mum got on well enough with him. I mean, he could have married her, actually, he was her contemporary. [Laughter.] He was the same age as mum. In fact, he was two years older than her. But that was the end result of my experience; that's what was bound to have happened, and it did. I never found boys of my own age interesting. I never had a normal development as far as meeting boys and having normal relationships with boys. I found boys of my own age just boring and not interesting. And I wanted someone to be a dad and look after me. Neither of which he did, because he was controlling and, actually, Victorian. [Laughter.] So, it was all a bit of a dead loss.

So I did suffer very badly. Mum didn't talk about Dad very much when we were growing up. She talked about him in general terms and she couldn't describe her emotions to us, because we all just got too upset. So it was all kept sort of down. Maybe if it had been twenty years later, or something, when everyone was a bit freer about emotions, and they were. It was almost like it was a bit shameful or a bit disgraceful to talk about your emotions in those days. It was something you never did. You just picked yourself up and got on with it and carried on regardless. That's what you did. And that's what she did.

And it got her through her life. That was her way of coping and it got her through and it got the three of us. We were all a bit bashed and battered and probably, if we'd... I wrote an article about it for *Courage*. I was special needs coordinator at a school, and I started off by saying, you know, "If special needs had existed in those days, we'd have all been labelled from top to bottom, you know, what with being a single parent and, well, a parent with a disability".

Mum's biggest fear was that we'd be taken into care. She was terrified of it because she obviously must have felt she was going under, sometimes. So, she was absolutely petrified that we would all be carted off into care, and that she wouldn't be able to get us out again. And she would sometimes threaten us and say, "Look, if you behave like that, you're all going to end up in a children's home." Which, of course, frightened us to death, so we'd be a bit better until the next time. But that was her biggest fear, that she would lose us, and we would get reported to the welfare, or something.

So she wouldn't have anything to do with welfare people, social workers or anyone; she just wouldn't have anything to do with them. And I think she was right, actually. So from that point of view, we were, I think, I felt we were a little family unit that was isolated, somehow.

I: To a certain extent, she was lucky because she could do her work from home.

R: Well, yes.

I: And that meant, unlike other widowed mothers, she didn't have to go out –

R: Yes, she didn't have to go out of the house. Yes, she was always at home, always at home. She hardly ever went out with, she never went out in the evening, ever, ever. I think, maybe, my uncle took her to the cinema once or twice while we were little. Unfortunately, he decided to emigrate to Australia; he had a massive family. We had a very big, extended family and lots of cousins. We had an aunt who lived over the road and she had a son, and my mother's nearest sibling, Uncle Ronnie, lived locally while we were growing up. And he had this massive family of twelve children. So all the cousins would get together; we all lived near each other.

In those days, children just went out, you know. She'd say, "Look, go out, take the dog, and which one of you has got a watch? You must be back here by ...". This was common practice in the '50s. "Woe betide you if you're not back by four o'clock", or whatever. We just ran riot over Hampstead Heath. I don't know whether you know Hampstead Heath, but it's a massive, massive area of sort of semi-wilderness. And we used to run riot. We used to go over there all day and run around and, you know, make camps and paddle in the ponds, and get filthy dirty, and have a great time. My cousins used to make trolleys out of bits of wood and pram wheels, and we used to, you know, ride them down hills, and get into all sorts of trouble and scrapes.

Because that's what you did in the '50s, you know. We grew up in a time where children had a lot of freedom, they were very independent, you were very streetwise, you learned to fend for yourself and stand up for yourself. And if someone hit you, you just hit them back. We used to have a great time growing up because we had masses of freedom. In the summer holidays Mum would say, "Right, I'm making you up these sandwiches, here's your fare, you can go to the Natural History Museum on the Tube". Right. So off we went, the three of us, with me in charge, right across London to Kensington and back again. No problems. That's what you did.

And like that, we learned to get around London on the Tube and buses on our own. I went to school, which was in Southwark, which is in South London. I used to leave Hampstead at 8:15 in the morning, get on two buses and go to Southwark every day, on my own. You wouldn't even hear of that happening now. We all were very independent, we were given a lot of freedom and it was a way of becoming streetwise; we were all very streetwise. We knew how to look after ourselves. And that was all part and parcel of growing up at that time. And, as I said, Mum combined that with giving us a family holiday every year, even though we might be staying in a caravan on the edge of a cliff [laughter], and taking us around to various parts of London. So we really knew our city, and we knew our heritage. She was very proud of being a Londoner and she was massively interested in history, and it all percolated down to us as well. We had a fabulous childhood.

I don't remember my childhood as being unhappy. I don't remember my mum being a victim and sitting around and saying, you know, life had dealt her a hard blow. I remember my childhood as being absolutely packed with good memories, lots and lots of activities, a lot of family events, of just being educated and having a good time. It was hard for anybody immediately post war. London was full of bomb sites. In fact, Mum used to take us down into the city to show us the bombed-out buildings.

And Mum was very, very anti-German, I'm sorry to say, because I know you're of German extraction. But, as I said earlier, she had a massive amount of anger in her, massive amount of anger, which she kept batted down. It did percolate through to me. I was a very angry child and a very angry person, well into my 20s and probably in my 30s. And I've never understood what it was all about. But it was about that, it was about what had happened to us. And—

I: So your Mum had definitely a great sense, as a war widow of course, that her husband had been killed by these people.

R: Yes, yes.

I: Did you have the same sense, growing up, that your father was killed as a result of the war?

R: Yes, yes, my mother was quite forthright, and she didn't beat about the bush at all. She said, you know, the Germans had killed my father. And that's what we were brought up to believe.³³ I'm going to tell you a story, and I apologise in advance because of your German background. But there was a girl in my class who came, I must have been in Year 6, yes, I was eleven, so it was just before I had to go into secondary school. There was a girl in my class who joined the school late, she came in Year 6, and she had been living in Germany. She wasn't German – her father must have been in the Forces, or something – but she'd been living in Germany, and she spoke German. Obviously, she spoke German. And I didn't like her. I didn't like her because I thought she was German.

³³ Respondent clarification: As she grew older, Mum's attitude softened, and she became more objective about the events of her younger life. As she acquired more of the family house, she rented out one or two rooms to a variety of tenants, including, at some point, a young German student. Apparently, this young student had confided in Mum that she was so ashamed of what had happened at the hands of the Nazis that she was thinking of changing her name. My mother talked to her about her feelings and told her that she could not possibly take on that sort of guilt as she was not even born, or only a baby or small child, when all that happened. So, a lot of that anger I discuss here dissipated over the years.

And so I was horrible to her. I got her engaged in a fight and really hurt her because she was German, I thought. She wasn't German. She was British or Irish, or something.

But that was what Mum felt. She felt that Dad had had this, he had had an awful life. It was his first opportunity to have a normal, married, happy family life, and it had been taken away from him. He was 40 years old and it was as a result of the war, and the Germans had killed him. They hadn't killed him exactly, but if he hadn't have had that terrible experience at the end of the war, he would have probably survived. But, on the other hand, he could have been killed in another theatre of war. They may never have met. I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you because of my father's experience and what brought them together.

But Mum was incapable, she would never have looked at it from that angle. If she hadn't have had that illness and Dad hadn't gone to that military hospital at Ashridge, they would never have met. And they wouldn't have had their three children. But, as far as I know, she never looked at it from that point of view. She was really, really, apart from being grief-stricken and bereaved and traumatised by the whole thing, she was angry, really angry. And that drove her; that anger drove her through her life. I'm quite sure of it, because I did experience it as well because I was very angry, and I often feel that some of the things that happened to me afterwards, after I married my first husband, that my anger drove me through a lot of negative experiences I had after that.

And that was born of my mum's anger. Although she may not have openly expressed it, it was always there and I always felt it, and I always shared it with her. So yes, she was a very angry woman, and I think it was what helped her, actually, get through a lot of her life and a lot of disappointments. But it certainly percolated down. And I was angry in my own right, anyway; I was angry that I'd been abandoned by my dad – that's how I saw it, well, I understood that that's what it was, abandonment. When I was older and I could analyse everything that had happened, it was an abandonment of me by him. And I was angry with him for doing that, because I didn't understand it. And because things were, there was such a tight lid on everything while we were growing up, you didn't talk about those sorts of things. You didn't want to crack up and break down. It took me such a long time to work it all out.

I do understand now what she went through. We didn't appreciate it, obviously, when we were little. How can you, you know? You can't. All we knew was that a bombshell had hit us and we were in it altogether, and that's what you did. You took it because it was dealt to you, and you got through it because there was nothing to support you. If Mum hadn't had her Mum at home, I don't know what she'd have done, quite honestly.

But then, you know, a further blow struck her because my grandmother was found to have terminal cancer. So Mum had to look after her as well. So when I was about, oh, eleven or twelve, Granny, who never, ever went near a doctor, never; she hated them with a vengeance and would never go near one, had had this cancer for a long time. And she collapsed in the end and got carted off to the hospital, where they found that, you know, she was riddled with cancer. And although they did try to treat it, it just spread all over.

So Mum looked after Granny for about three years and nursed her through her last illness, at home. Granny and Mum were very, very close. Of all the children, Mum and Gran were the closest, because the others had all gone off and were doing their thing. And Uncle Ronnie, who Mum was very, very close to and had really loved him, had gone off to Australia, you see. So that was all caput as well.

So, with Granny's illness, I mean, we were teenagers then and we were very aware of the dreadful strain it took on her, and the toll it took on her. Because, again, cancer was a word that was never mentioned, you mustn't mention it, you know. It had this, I don't know, it had this taboo about it. So when mum, I remember being with Mum in the street, you know, and she'd meet a friend and they'd say, "Oh, and how's your mum?" They'd go into those hushed tones about, that's because people did.

I was about thirteen or fourteen when Granny died, and then, now you're not going to believe what I'm going to tell you now, the batty old aunt upstairs – I mean, by this time, she had got dementia – she was a spinster, she'd been in service. She was my grandmother's aunt, and, along with all the rest of the family [living in this house], she occupied the attic rooms in the top of the house. But by the time Granny died, Auntie Caroline she was, but we called her Aunt Car, she was in her 80s or something, and she was getting dementia. So Mum ended up looking after her as well, until such time as she couldn't cope with her anymore, because she really had gone, you know, AWOL.

So she [Aunt Car], for the last few years of her life, went into a home. But Mum had power of attorney for her. So yes, I don't think Mum had time to sit down and tear her hair out and say, "Oh, woe is me!" She was always too busy. She had too much to occupy her. She was just working, working all the time.

I: So this was in the mid to late '50s?

R: So we're talking about the very early '60s now, yes. When Granny died I was thirteen, so that would have been ... oh, hang on ... '59, I suppose. '59 or '60. Maybe I was fourteen. So we've come up to about 1960 now, yes.

I: Did she work through caring for her mother? She kept working?

R: Yes, yes, kept working. She never stopped, she never, ever stopped working, ever. She always had, she'd say, "Oh, I'm snowed under with work this month". Or, "Oh, I've got a rush job". A rush job meant she had to squash it in-between perhaps two manuscripts she was doing. Someone would ring her up. I mean, she worked for all sorts of people, I think she typed something for the Duke of Edinburgh once. She worked for absolutely all sorts of people, for universities and authors and scientists and historians. You name it, she worked for organisations; she always had loads and loads of work.

I: So it was, by the sound of it, partly because you, and your siblings, and your mother were able to live with your grandparents, in their house—

R: Yes.

I: —and because your mother managed to set up for herself an incredibly successful business that she worked hard for ... As a result of that, as I understand it, then, you never felt like there was any economic hardship, any kind of financial hardship?

R: We did. Well, we knew we were not well-off. There was always enough money for food. I mean, Granny would always cook Sunday lunch, and my grandfather was well-paid, he had a good job. So there was always, Granny would always, I'm sure they had an arrangement, Mum and Gran, whereby they pitched in for food. I don't know. I mean, a load of stuff was rationed, anyway, it was rationed. I remember queuing up in Sainsbury's and various shops with ration books when I was growing [up] in the early '50s. We'd go to Sainsbury's or the butcher's, or wherever, and everything was on ration and you were only allowed a certain amount. I always remember going to the market with my

grandmother on a Saturday and we'd buy up loads and loads of, she'd buy loads of fruit and veg and stuff in the market.

There was always enough food, and Mum would never, never let us go to school without, she cooked us a breakfast in the morning. It used to amaze me, Nadine, when I was working as a teacher that children would come to school with no breakfast. They'd either have a packet of crisps or a bag of sweets. And, of course, they fell asleep in school; they were cold and they were hungry, and they'd fall asleep. I knew they couldn't learn. Why is that? I don't understand it. Mum cooked us a breakfast; we'd either have bacon and eggs or scrambled eggs, or a boiled egg or a fried egg, and we'd have porridge. Now, I never understood that when I was teaching, why children would come to school with no breakfast, or a bag of crisps. A bowl of porridge does not cost much; a bowl of porridge with some milk and a bit of brown sugar or golden syrup, and a bit of toast. That doesn't cost much. Why do children have to starve, and their only meal is the one they get at lunchtime at school, very often. Because you can cook healthy, basic food for very little.

So, Gran and Mum had an arrangement. I don't know what it was. Obviously, when Granny got too ill to do anything, Mum had to do the lot. Granny couldn't go and carry heavy shopping bags about or stand over a cooker, or anything like that. So, Mum would be cooking for us and my grandfather as well, because he wouldn't have known how to boil an egg. He was a typical Victorian man. Women's place was in the home, and his place was out working, or in the pub. [Laughter.]

But, between us all, we coped. We were aware that we were not as well-off as a lot of other children, but we always had clothes on our backs, a roof over our heads and food in our stomachs, throughout our childhood. So, you know, Mum didn't bang on about it all the time. She didn't say, "We can't have this and we can't have that." She went without herself, she went without. If we had to get clothes sometimes from a jumble sale, so be it. I don't know whether you know what a jumble sale is [laughter], but jumble sales were very popular in the '50s and '60s. And, you know, we always had good shoes. She'd go out in the autumn, we'd have an expedition to the shops in the autumn; we'd all be kitted up with new shoes for the winter, all new school uniform, and in the summer we'd all go to the shop and get sandals and summer clothes. So, we always had clothes. They may not have been the height of fashion but they were always new clothes, and we were always clean, and well-scrubbed, and well-fed.

I: You did say that, because you grew up without a father and because your mother was a war widow and also deaf, you did feel like you were different.

R: Yes. Yes, I did.

I: So, was there ever a sense of a community of war widows? Because there must have been other women around—

R: No.

I: —who'd also lost their husbands in the war?

R: None at all. No, never met any. I mean, one thing I will say, which isn't to do with what you just asked me, but it's just come into my head. I discussed it a bit with Jean. Jean and I discuss a lot. Jean was born after he died, after Dad died, so she grew up completely without a father. I grew up with a knowledge of a father. So our experiences have been very different. Jean said, "I didn't have a father, I never knew him, and

therefore I don't miss him." And I grew up with the knowledge of a father, and traumatised by his loss, and very much missing him.

She had a normal adolescent, I'd say much more normal than I did, anyway, normal adolescent period in her life, where she went out with boys of her own age, and did what teenagers do and got up to the stuff that teenagers do with, as I say, boys, her peers. Whereas I did not, I didn't do any of those things. I always fraternised with people a lot older than me and preferred older men. Because I had this great big hole in my life, which Jean didn't. I don't feel envious or anything of her. It's just the way.

R: Yes, we all grew up with a different experience. Isn't that interesting? I was the one who had to be in charge; I was the one who was probably more traumatised than the other two, because David can't really remember. He says, "I remember a man." He was only two. Jean had no experience so she doesn't have any sort of grief or bereavement. And we all had lived in the same house, with the same mother, and had the same upbringing, but we all had different experiences of that single event. I often wonder what it would have been like had we gone on and, you know, as a normal family and he hadn't died like that. Just hypothetical, isn't it?

Do you want me to move on a bit, more forwards to when Mum got involved with the war widows at this point ... ?

I: **Yes. You've already said that your Mum told you and that you felt that you all had this incredible sense of anger at, you know, ...**

R: Well, yes. An unfairness. Injustice. Yes.

I: **Yes, and not having that family life. And I wonder, then, if that almost naturally fed into—?**

R: Well, I suppose it did because, obviously, all the war widows, especially the early ones, probably all felt like she did, you know, this outrage and anger and frustration, and everything else negative you can possibly imagine. And the helplessness. They were powerless to do anything. I think that because of the unfairness and injustice of it all, it helped them with their campaign. Because they were all kind of randomly spread across the country. None of them were in contact with each other at all and neither did my mum know, we didn't know any other widows. I don't even remember having a friend whose parent was a widow. That's why I just felt out on a limb.

I remember having a row with a friend of mine who lived down the road, and we had this childish row, as children do, we had a quarrel. And she said, "I'm not staying here anymore", and she went slamming out of the door. And I opened the letterbox and I shouted, "Well, it's alright for you, you've got a dad". So that's how angry I felt.

It was because of an article that was published in the paper, I think it was the *Daily Mail*, or one of those papers anyway. A returning war widow from ... Do you know of this story? This is what got the first group together in about 1969 or 1970. Well, I won't repeat that because you know the story of the Australian war widow.

I: **So this is Laura Connelly, isn't it?**

R: I'm not sure of her name.

I: **I think it was Laura Connelly, and in Britain, as you said before, the pitiful War Widows' Pension—**

R: Yes, it was taxed, yes.

I: **—was taxed at 50% because it was [considered] “unearned income”.**

R: Yes, that's correct. Well, that didn't happen in Australia. The woman in question, I think must have been widowed for a second time, and decided to come back to England. And to her horror, found that her War Widows' Pension was going to be heavily taxed, and refused to pay the tax. She was absolutely adamant she wasn't going to pay it and so she was threatened with some hideous punishment by Inland Revenue. And her case was taken up by one of the dailies. I can't remember which one it was.³⁴ It doesn't matter. Oh, it may have been the *Sunday Mail*, one of those. And she was given a load of publicity, which brought it into the public domain. There was absolute outrage and the powers that be backed down.

This is what instigated a group of war widows spread over the country to come together. There was no email, not everyone had a telephone, you had to do it all by letter. A group of war widows managed to galvanise themselves, in about 1969, I think, and met in London in a Lyons Corner House. I don't know whereabouts in London, but Mum was one of them. And they decided that on the back of this case they would form the War Widows' Association of Great Britain. So it started off in a very small way with only a handful of women who had been, you know, all had the same experience. They'd all been scattered around all over the shop, and all been busy bringing up their families, and hadn't had time to sort of, you know, brush their hair, let alone organise a pressure group.

So gradually, they got themselves organised and put more and more pressure on government. Over the years, it took years and years before the government decided that they would not tax the War Widows' Pension. It took a long time and a lot of pressure, and a lot of letters, and a lot of support from interested parties, people like Baroness Strange, who was the President for a while. And, of course, Prince Charles is their patron. And he's a bloody good patron as well and very supportive to them.

They've got an awful lot of clout now; they didn't have much clout in those days, they were just a little disparate group of women, standing up for their rights. But because they had the experiences that they'd had, they were persistent and they weren't going to give up. And that's what has made them into the organisation that they are now. Mum was a regional organiser for London, for years and years, which meant that she organised the Cenotaph event. Have you ever been to it? You have?

I: **Yes.**

R: The War Widows' [Association's] one? I was away last year. I always go but I missed it last year. Well, she organised that for years, decades, in fact. And it started off, on the Saturday before the big, you know, the big Remembrance do on the Sunday, the day before, a little group of them would go down to Whitehall. And they'd have a Chaplain with them, and I think they may have had a choir, a small choir, perhaps a handful of people, choirboys someone had managed to get from somewhere. And they'd stand in the middle of the traffic with buses and cars and lorries whooshing up and down, and have their little service at the Cenotaph, dodging all the vehicles, and trying to make themselves heard over the din and the uproar. They would lay the wreath and then they would weave back through the traffic, avoiding getting mown down. And as soon as they'd gone, someone would come out from one of the governmental offices, take the

³⁴ Clarification: Laura Connolly's case was featured in a Sunday newspaper in 1971.

wreath and throw it away. That's what they did, for years, until they started to get a little bit more

I: I had no idea ...

R: Yes, yes. That's what they did. It was very comical the way she described it, with all these old women getting on, and a rather crotchety old clergyman sort of tottering across the road with the wreath,³⁵ trying to sing a hymn with all the traffic hurling by. And not even a police escort or anything, they just felt they had to, they were allowed to do it but they had to get it done as, the bottom line was 'get it over and done as soon as possible and get out', was the feeling.

But then, as they grew and grew and had more and more members and became more important, and had more clout, it's become a big event.

I: Yes, and now, of course, it's close.

R: Yes, very close. Yes, I mean, Mum said, "As soon as one of them is over, I have to start organising the next year's event." She had to liaise with the police; she had to liaise with the St John's Ambulance; she had to liaise with the government. Also, she had to organise an event at a restaurant. She had to get all the orders of service printed, and organise a couple of coaches, depending on where the venue would be for the meal afterwards. There was an enormous amount of organisation she would say it required. And she organised it virtually up to the day she died.

I: When was that?

R: She died in 2007. Now, that was the year she decided to resign from her duty. She said, "I've done it for long enough, I don't want to do it anymore. I'm going to hand it over". Those were her words. "I'm handing it over". So that was the last one she organised, so it would have been, it would have been about the, yes, it was the 8th November 2007, the last one she organised.

Mum didn't like using a wheelchair. She'd got to the point where she actually needed a wheelchair but she didn't like using one, she would avoid it. So, come Remembrance, the 8th November, Mum had got very frail by that time. Jeremy and I went to the war widows' ceremony on that Saturday and we took her, and we had free parking. She always got free parking in, oh God, I can't remember the city, it's not city, Westminster Boys' car park, just off the side of Westminster, we had a permit. We had the wheelchair in the back of the car. So I said to her, "Shall we take the wheelchair?" And she said, "Oh no, I don't, it's not very far, it's only a walk up the King Charles Street. But for her, that was quite a long walk, it took quite a long time. So she said no, she didn't want it, so we left it in the car. She said, "Anyway, they have wheelchairs there, at the event", she said, "there'll be a wheelchair. So, if I want to, I'll go in that".

Anyway, the time came to go to the ceremony, and we got to the bottom of the steps at the back of King Charles Street and, actually, she was looking like she wasn't going to get up them. So we found a couple of strong [men]. Jeremy and another sort of big, strong military bloke sort of virtually heaved her up the stairs and we walked through to King Charles Street, where everyone was assembled, and they were about to start. And I looked around for a wheelchair and there were none, because we'd taken so long. So I couldn't because the security's so heavy, I couldn't go back and get it, because they wouldn't let me through. So she had to stand. It was a very cold day as well, that day,

³⁵ Respondent clarification: I was in my very early thirties then, and these women appeared old to me then, even though many of them were only in their 50s and 60s.

and she was standing, sort of propped up holding onto something. A barrier, I think, or something. It's not a long service but, anyway, it really, really was too much for her.

And also, that day, Prince Charles turned up as well out of the [blue]. He does sometimes. It's unannounced because it has to be. But then he came to the reception afterwards and was introduced to everyone, and she and he had a chat. Because she was a regional officer [organiser] and she went to a lot of events in London, and she met him quite a few times because he's a very good patron and turns up to a lot of things. So they were having a chat and then we had our meal and we came home.

And the very next Thursday, I was going away for a few days to France. So the day before, so we're talking about the 14th of November, the day before Jeremy and I were going to France, I went up to see her. My cousin, John, was having lunch with her, her eldest nephew from Surrey had come up to see her for the day. She and he were having lunch and I came in and I said, "Oh, we're going to France tomorrow." And she said, "Okay," and she said something really strange. I don't know why she said it but it stuck in my mind. She said, "When you come back," it was only for a week we were going, she said, "When you come back from France we'll go through that old box of your dad's." Out of the blue. So I said, "Okay," because I knew about that box, it's always been around since we were kids, it's got a few bits and bobs of his in it. She said, "We'll go through that old box of your dad's." So I said, "Okay, we'll do that. I'll see you next week."

The next day was Thursday the 15th, and we set off very early to get the boat to go over to France. And on the way, I had a phone call from my sister, very early in the morning, to say, "Ring me when you get this message". Anyway, I could not contact her, I kept ringing and kept ringing. The further away we got from London, it was the same, I couldn't contact her. I didn't know what was going on. My feeling now, afterwards, I should have gone back, but I didn't.

What had happened was that Mum had rung her up very early in the morning, on Thursday morning, and said she felt really ill, had terrible, terrible pain in her back. Well, Mum always had a pain in her back, you know, Mum was riddled with osteoarthritis, but this was something else. So Jean decided to take her to the hospital. the Royal Free Hospital was just down the road from where they live. So, the reason I couldn't contact them was because there was no signal in the basement of the hospital where the A&E was. So I was ringing and ringing, and they were in the hospital and I didn't know.

It was not until we almost got down to Dover that I managed to contact somebody because my brother was out at work, and Jean was the only one around. So, she couldn't contact me, and I think she'd spoken to David. She just said she was at the hospital with mum. When I got down to Dover, I had managed to get through to either my sister or my brother-in-law, or vice-versa, and they said that Mum was ill, she was in the hospital and that was all under control. But I then said to Jeremy, "I'm not going to France, I'm going to go home". So he put me on a train to come home. Unfortunately, we were going on holiday with some people – not holiday, just, we have a house over in Normandy, so it's not that far, over across the Channel – but we'd arranged to meet these people. So he went on to France; I got on a train and went back home.

Unfortunately, I must have got the slowest train that was ever timetabled to travel between Dover and Victoria. It stopped at every tiny, little place on the way. When I got to Victoria Station, I was getting in a panic because Mum was obviously very ill, there was something very... I'd managed to speak with my brother-in-law while I was on the train, and I knew I had to get back as fast as possible. I thought, "I'll get in a taxi". I didn't have enough money for the taxi. There was a huge queue for taxis at Victoria. I explained to the person at the top of the queue, "I've got to get, my mum's in hospital, I think

something terrible has happened". They let me jump the queue, I got into the taxi, I explained to the driver, "Look, I haven't got enough money, I've only got so-and-so". And do you know what he said? "Oh, I'll take you as far as your money will last". Can you imagine? He knew I was in the most terrible plight. I said, "Look, stop off, we'll get some money on the way, but I need to get to the Royal Free Hospital". He was a really unpleasant man.

Anyway, he did actually take me to hospital. I flung the money at him through the window and rushed in, only to find that my mother had died. I'd missed it by half an hour, something like that. What the hospital had done, I mean, I'll never forgive them, and it would have been pointless trying to sue them or kicking up a fuss about it. Mum had gone in with excruciating pain in her back, in her upper back. She had generalised, she had, as I said, terrible, she was in constant pain all the time. Now, excruciating pain in the upper back of a woman usually symbolises heart. With a man, it's down the arm. With a woman, it's mostly in the back.

She'd been in the hospital since early morning, they'd sedated her and they'd done some tests on her, and she'd gone to sleep for a little while, they'd given her painkillers. And then they decided to discharge her with painkillers. My sister and my brother-in-law were getting her into her wheelchair when, all of a sudden, she screamed out, "The pain has come back," and collapsed. And she'd had an aneurysm, an aortic aneurysm, and died instantly. But the hospital hadn't sussed it out, and they should have done.

I think operating for an aneurysm on an 84-year-old woman who was clearly, you know, very frail would have proved fatal, to be honest. But what made me really angry was that they hadn't worked out what it was. I mean, it was classic, classic symptoms. And she died instantly. And Mum always said to us, she always, always said, "When I die I want it to be [clicks fingers], like that. And she would click her fingers, and that is exactly what happened. She died instantly. She said, "I cannot bear to think that I would die a long, drawn-out death." Like her mother, you see, and probably my dad. You know, she'd seen enough of that in her life and she just wanted to drop dead, and she dropped dead, and that's what she wanted. And we just said, "Well, she got her wish." I mean, we were poleaxed by it, it was so sudden. And I was, you know, I got to the hospital just that little bit too late.

So it was a massive shock because when it's a sudden death you don't have any time to prepare for it. But I wonder, you know, it did cross my mind whether she'd had some kind of premonition when she'd said to me, "Look, when you come home we'll go through that box of your dad's." Out of the blue, I mean, it came, I just thought, "Why did she say that?" So yeah, it was a terrific shock, but one of the nice things at her funeral was that Prince Charles had written us a lovely letter of, because he'd only met her a few days before. They'd had this chat, you see, at the War Widows' [Association] bash, you know, after the ceremony. And he wrote this absolutely lovely personalised letter, which we read at the funeral. So yes, Mum got, her last wish was fulfilled.

But I understand now that the War Widows' Association, of which I'm an Associate Member, as you know, has gone on to bigger and better things. And I think there are quite a lot of war widows in my little circle of friends who are not so happy with it now, as they used to be because it's becoming quite a corporate organisation; this is what they feel, anyway. It was a, when Mum was alive and, well, I suppose, seven, ten years ago now, ten years ago, it was a very different organisation to what it is now. It was closer and it was a little bit more, it wasn't quite as professional as it is now, it's become very professional. It was a little bit more amateurish then.

I: Grass roots.

R: Yes. But of course, the older ladies are dying, you see. And the other sad thing about the war widows is that the War Widows' Association as it is will become defunct, unless wars continue to happen. Which I find it rather ironic – unless we have wars, we won't have any war widows. Really, it's going into the future now, the War Widows [Association]. I mean, one or two war widows I know, the older ones, they do grouse about it, but, you know, times move on, it has to change. It has to become more upmarket and sort of be, compete in a... it's a charity, you know, it has to compete in a corporate world. And it's not the sort of little amateur thing that it was years ago, which was much cosier, much friendlier. Yes, more anachronistic, I suppose, yes.

I: **Well, you've given us an amazing picture of, I think, your mother's life, but also how it was defined, in a way, by her war widowhood. Even though, as you said, she just kept going on. She just carried on.**

R: Yes.

I: **And also how it affected you and your siblings. What do you think is different now for war widows? Has the War Widows' Association done its job because the tax was abolished?**

R: I think they have, I think the War Widows' Association's been very, very successful. I mean, I'm still an associate member and I will continue to be an associate member. I think that there are people who work exceptionally hard for war widows, and war widows have got, obviously, a much better deal than when Mum was struggling along, and also her peers. And even after the War Widows were founded and they became an organisation, things were still not very good for them. They still had to struggle; not so much because their children had grown up by then. They were a bunch of very doughty, feisty women; they were formidable, actually, those women. You would not like to meet them up a dark alley late at night.

They really fought hard, and I think they continue to fight hard. I think they might have taken a different direction now but, I mean, I think that's inevitable. They've had to change; they're not the same organisation that was founded but, I mean, they're not going to be successful if they stay in the same place. And I think that younger war widows have got a hell of a lot more going for them now. I mean, it's tragic, they lose their husbands, it's terrible that their husbands give their lives in service to their country. But that is one thing that when you sign up as a soldier or in the services, you have to be prepared to do. But all the same, you know, if you are a woman whose husband loses his life in the service of the country, or a man whose wife loses it for the ... On the other hand, not many war widowers, but it does happen sometimes. It's different to losing your husband in a car accident or from a disease, you know. Your husband has given his life in the service of the country. And therefore, you do deserve to be compensated in a way that other widows would not be compensated.

I think that that's what I always felt, and I think the War Widows' [Association] should continue in that vein. If you give your life up in the service of the country then your family deserves, not to be rewarded, but to be compensated in some way, and that's the end of it. That's what I believe. And I feel that the war widows of yesteryear were dealt a very hard blow and they were not treated like war widows in other countries, for example, in Australia. They were treated very badly; they were penalised for being war widows. And that's not on. So I hope the War Widows' [Association] continues to be a successful organisation and to flourish. But it will only flourish if there are more war widows – and that's what the sad side of it is, in my opinion. It's a defunct organisation, like UKIP, you know, if there are no wars there will be no war widows. It won't have a purpose or an aim, will it? And there always will be wars.

Of course, there are men or women who will be not directly killed in a war, but will die several years later, like my father did. And like the husband of the present London rep; her husband was badly injured in the Gulf, Gulf or Falklands, I can't remember, and died ten years ago. She was a newly-bereaved war widow who my mum handed the reins to. She used to come to see Mum and Mum used to talk to her, and she said, "I want," her name's Kathy, she said, "Kathy's the person I want to take over from me". And that's what happened. She has. But yes, they were strong women, those war widows. And I think, probably, war widows nowadays maybe don't have to be quite as strong and tough as those ones did. They've got more support from the government and from counselling and bereavement agencies. And money, they have more money, you know, that's what they needed and what they didn't have.

I: I think your mother was very concerned about the future of War Widows. She wrote a letter for the War Widows' Association website that asked younger war widows of new generations

R: That's correct.

I: – to continue to band together.

R: Yes, she did.

I: Do you think that will happen with the new generation of war widows?

R: Well, I'm not sure, actually. I know that Mum always said to me, "Look, if younger war widows don't support us and join us then we will fizzle out and we won't be an association anymore. And," she said, "we worked so hard for this, you know, we worked our socks off and we gave up so much, and if they don't show willing then the War Widows' Association, as it is, won't survive anymore."

But I understand, from bits of, because I don't join in, I do go to War Widows' [Association] events, but not many, only a few, only the London ones. But from grass roots' gossip – it's not gossip, actually, it's not gossip – I think what they're saying is that there are other groups that are banding together. The War Widows' [Association] is not an exclusive group anymore. There's Army Widows and there's another organisation, I don't know what they're all called but ...

I: Each arm of the services has its own widows' association.

R: Yes, yes. And I think that there are other rival groups starting up, which isn't a bad thing, in a way, because I mean, they've all got the same goal in mind, haven't they? I go to the War Widows, both events, I go to both when I'm here, that is; I go to one on the Saturday and the one on the Sunday, the big one. And it is noticeable that most of the women are older. There are a few, and there are a few children, you know, grandchildren, perhaps, or children of younger widows.

But I do understand, from what is being said, that there are other groups that have got together and maybe the War Widows doesn't have the same membership as it did. And certainly, if you look in 'Courage' magazine, you'll see that all the events are all, you know, the Christmas events, all the Remembrance events, all the get-togethers, they're all sort of snowy-white-haired ladies with walking sticks. [Laughter]. And there are no younger ones.

I: But of course, we do know that younger war widows exist.

R: Yes, we do. I hope that, you know, mum's fears will be allayed in that respect because it was something she was concerned about. But you can't make them join; they'll only join, (a) if they're ready and, (b) if they want to. You can't, you know, bereavement is something that, you can't control it; you can't make somebody join an organisation when they're in the middle of a bereavement or they're grief-stricken. They will gradually come round to it. Because, I mean, the War Widows will be, are terrifically supportive to each other, and they have an awful lot more funding than they did have. An awful lot more. They're a much wealthier organisation than they used to be. So, you know, it's really in the lap of the Gods, isn't it, whether people join it or not.

I: **So, your mother, Joyce Maxwell, she, of course, was a war widow, that's what we've spoken about. And she ended up organising the War Widows' Association Service of Remembrance, the Saturday, as you said, before the official service, for 35 years, something like that?**

R: Oh, it must have been, yes. Yes, absolutely. Years and years, yes.

I: **Partly, of course, to commemorate your father—**

R: Oh, of course, yes.

I: **—as well as the other husbands who were killed in the war. And you've said you still continue to go?**

R: Yes, I go every year.

I: **And you'll keep going to both of them?**

R: I will go to both of them for as long as I can, yes. There's a lot of standing about. That's another thing, you see, a lot of them can't do, especially the Sunday one. Mum used to go to the Sunday one but, because of her position, she got a seat in Richmond House so she could look down on it. But I think the numbers that do go to the Sunday one are shrinking because you have to stand for a long time, for hours. It's very tiring. So you've got to be fairly fit or pretty determined to be able to stand.

And they do look after the Saturday ones, because they provide wheelchairs. After that unfortunate experience with the wheelchairs, I think they learned that they need more wheelchairs rather than less, now. But, well, you know, it depends how the cookie crumbles as far as membership is concerned, and how long they will keep going. But I certainly will hang on to my associate membership. I wouldn't have been able to do this interview without it, and I think it's a very valuable thing to have done. So it's going to be archived and will be used for research, or, in the future.

I think my mum's experience, or our experience as a family, was massively important as a bit of social history. If I were an historian in the future, I'd be really interested to read this, because it just shows how, it just illustrates how (a) women were just really swept aside. They were just swept aside. They weren't important. Women didn't have the status in those days that they have now. They were just left to get on, left to their own devices and left to bring up their families, without any intervention whatsoever. And it was sink or swim time, and it was weakest to the wall. That's what it was. And we were lucky that we had a mother like we did, and that we had an extended family, because we did, and that's how we got by. It was just sheer grit and determination that got my mum through, which she wouldn't have done otherwise, and we could well have been taken into care.

I: As happened to the children of many other war widows.

R: Yes, absolutely, quite right too. I mean, in fact, my Uncle Ronnie, the one with thirteen children, although one died, twelve children, his – I only found this out very recently – that his wife, after the child, one of her children died. It was a cot death. It was awful. She had a nervous breakdown. And the youngest children, the older ones they were adults, all could cope. The younger members of the family all had to go into care. I didn't know that. They had to go into care for several months, if not a year. And I only found that out a few weeks ago, when one of them was talking to me. Now he's a professor at a university. [Laughter.]

I: It's funny how those stories get buried, sometimes.

R: Yes.

I: Then I suppose, that's what we don't want to happen with stories like yours and many others.

R: Yes, I mean, I read a book recently, called *The Throwaway Children*, about children who were, post-war, taken into care and sent to Australia. That could have happened to us, easily, if it hadn't have been for my mum, you know. That's why she was so frightened of it all the time, "You're going to be taken into a home," you know, in brackets, if I break down and can't cope.

I: But, of course, she did.

R: Yes, she certainly did. She certainly did, yes. I'm very proud of her.

I: I imagine so.

R: Yes. Now, I am and, well, obviously, since I've been an adult. But as a child, I mean, you don't, I don't think you think of being proud of your parents, you just, you're a child, you know. Your parent is there and that parent looks after you and protects you, and you don't think about being proud of them until you look back and think, "God! How did they do that?"

I: And, of course, your mother managed to raise you, was able to take care of her mother, her aunt.

R: Yes.

I: But at the same time, she also achieved an awful lot for other war widows.

R: She did, yes.

Well, I think she'd be, she would be very disappointed if the War Widows' [Association] did, you know, crumble and turn into an organisation which didn't have a future. Because she and those other founder members worked so hard. I mean, it took over their lives for so many years, and it was their crowning achievement, actually, that's what it was. And they received, you know, they were OBEs or MBEs, most of them, but they were recognised nationally for what they did. And maybe other younger war widows would have no idea of that history. It's an organisation that they've joined and they wouldn't know about that. I mean, when you join an organisation, when you're older, you don't necessarily know what's gone before, do you?

I: About the history ...

R: No, no. You wouldn't know that there were all those struggling young women bringing up families and, you know, nearly killing themselves to create this organisation of which they're now members. But they joined it because they've maybe witnessed a similar happening, and they maybe wouldn't have a clue about the history of it – unless they were interested.

I: Ruth, you said that just a week or so before your mother passed away, she mentioned your dad's box again. Can I ask you what was in that box?

R: Yes. It was something extremely interesting in that box, actually, that I didn't know about. Well, mostly in the box there was stuff that, there was his joining-up papers, his leaving school certificates, some correspondence that Mum had with various people who sent her information about the Death March. There were some newspaper cuttings because Mum was interviewed by one or two newspapers, I just, oh God, I can't remember, it was some years ago. It was an anniversary of World War Two and she was interviewed by the Daily Telegraph.

There's bits and bobs in there, not much else, if I can remember. A pair of glasses in there, which must have been his. Of course, I don't know who else they would have belonged to. There's little epaulettes from his uniform, Royal Artillery epaulettes, which I've given to my son. Various bits of documentation articles.

Now, the most interesting thing that I found in that box, when I was going through it after she died, was two letters. They are in a very fragile state. Now, you remember that I mentioned to you that he had these two elderly aunts who lived in the Peabody Buildings, who spoke with Indian accents. We absolutely loved them. They were Alice and Leah, and then their sister was Ruth Blanche, who is my grandmother, and there was this fourth sister called Ellen Grace, who was born in 1883, or something like that, in India. They were all born in India, these four sisters.

During my research, I found most of the documentation concerning Alice, Leah – their birth certificates, their marriage certificates, and my grandmother. Including my grandmother's whereabouts, her grave in India, to which I've also been. I've been able to find out quite a lot about those three. But there's this fourth eldest daughter called Ellen Grace – never been able to find out anything at all about her, anything whatsoever, apart from her date of birth in India. And then the trail went absolutely cold. I tried to find out, of course, being a child when I knew Alice and Leah meant that I wasn't able to talk to them about any of this, so I didn't know there was a fourth sister. Or anything at all about her.

When I went through that box, there were these two old letters, and they were dated, Lucknow, 1931, 1930/31. And this woman, who is Ellen Grace, has answered a letter in response to a request from my father to find his birth certificate. Well, they were not birth certificates, they were baptismal certificates in those days, they were not birth... Because so many children died at birth, they didn't actually register them until they were baptised, perhaps when they realised they were actually going to survive. So they had a, it was a baptismal certificate he wanted. He wanted it because he'd left school and he was going to get a job in the Post Office, somewhere in India, in northern India, in a hill station.

So he'd got in touch... by this time, Leah and Alice had come to England because they'd married these soldiers and they'd returned to England. So Ellen Grace was the only sister left because his own mother had died. So, he's written to her to ask her, "Where

is my baptismal certificate?" And she hasn't got a clue, because she says in the letter, "Well, my sister, his mother, took those little ones and put them in that school, in Orissa." So she obviously disapproved. Well, she didn't offer to look after them, but she obviously, by the tone of the letter, disapproved of her sister putting her three children in an orphanage. So she didn't know where the baptismal certificate was. But she had a few ideas, and she said that she would try to locate it.

So she's written a couple of letters to various people, the clergyman, to try to track this baptismal certificate down. And I swear, I have never seen those letters before. I don't know how many times Mum looked through that box, and I have looked through that box before, I've never seen those letters before. And those are the only evidence I have of his Aunt Ellen, as she was known, being alive. And she was in Lucknow in the 1930s, I assume, married to a soldier, because Lucknow is a garrison town, and wrote these letters. And she said at the end of one of them [said], "Yes, well, please let me know how my nephew does in his job in Mussoorie. I'd really like to know". She sounds quite officious.

But I can't trace what happened to her after that. And if Mum had have lived, we'd have gone through that box and I'd have said, "Oh God! Look, this is the fourth sister." So that's a mystery, I don't... yeah. It's just a box of bits and bobs that belonged to him, really, there's nothing much in there. But they were his, so that's all we have. Plus a few photographs that, we have photographs he took during his time as a soldier, some quite interesting old black and white photographs of India and him with his mates, you know, his colleagues, these soldiers, and him on a horse. And skulls in the desert, you know. [Laughter.] And probably a few of the prisoner of war camp, too. Just a random assortment of photographs of, nothing from his childhood or anything like that.

I: But still, your father's box.

R: Yes, that's right, yeah.

I: Ruth, is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

R: I think we've probably covered as much ground as I can in this session. I mean, I'm sure there will be other things that I'll think, "Oh, I wish I'd told Nadine that." But there's loads of stuff, I mean, we could sit here for a week, probably. I think I've probably covered all the salient points and you've got a pretty good idea of what things were like.

There's one very little poignant thing that I remember; I didn't tell you, it's only just kind of sprung into my mind, about the day that my dad was buried. He's buried in Hampstead Cemetery, and when we were kids we used to go. Mum took us over there regularly. But Jean always said, "I could never get my, I could never understand, my father is buried here". She said, "I could never, when I was a child". She said, "I just used to look at the grave and think, 'That's a skeleton'". She always used to say that, "My dad is a skeleton". It sounds awfully macabre, but that's the only way she could relate.

Anyway, the day of the funeral, my mum said she was going through the cemetery. It's a very big, you know, one of those urban, metropolitan, London cemeteries, it's huge. So they travelled down the main path in the car and she said she was looking out of the window, and she said this inscription on a grave that they passed caught her imagination. And she thought, "I'm going to use that". It was only a sentence. She said, "I'm going to put that on Bill's grave when we get the stone laid, that's what I'm going to put." Because it was so, you know, it summed up what she was feeling at the time. So she did. And the sentence was, "I shall not leave thee comfortless." Which is, you know, it's beautiful, isn't it? So that's what's written on, that's the inscription on his grave.

And she said, for years afterwards, years and years afterwards, especially when we used to go to the grave, regularly, as children, she said, “I looked for that inscription and I never found it.” And I have looked for it, and we’ve never found it. And I just thought, “Well, how did that happen?”

I: That’s what’s on your father’s grave?

R: Yes, that’s what’s on his grave. And Mum didn’t want to be buried, she said she wanted to be cremated, she thought it was better. Although, I think, believe the grave is an actual double grave, but anyway, she said she wanted to be cremated and have her ashes interred. So that’s what we’ve done. We’ve interred her ashes at the side of his grave and put an extra bit on top. It’s very plain because it was all she could afford, it’s just a plain slab, so there was room on the top to put an extra small slab with her details on it. But it was quite uncanny that, because no-one has been able to find that inscription. But yet, she swears she saw it, looking out of the window.



Fig. 8: Ruth Maxwell with a photograph of her mother, Joyce Mary Maxwell. 8 May 2017.



Fig. 2: Joyce and William at their engagement. 1945.

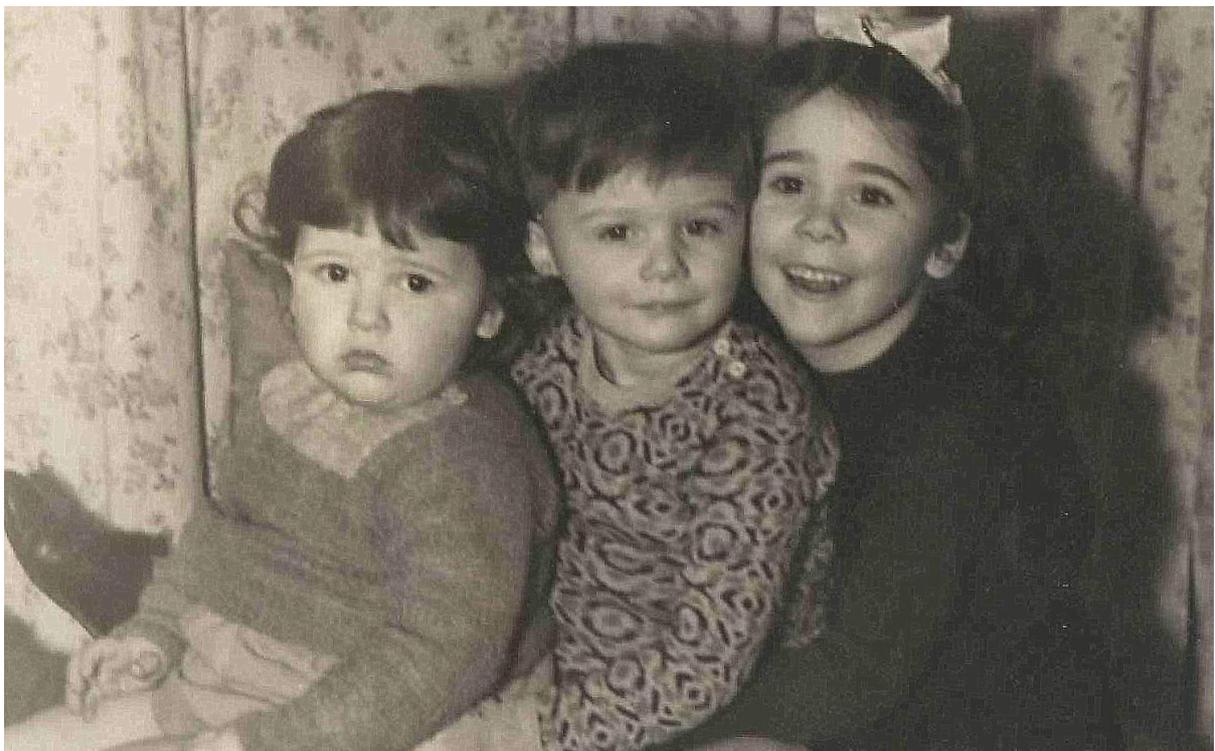


Fig. 3: Ruth (right) and her two siblings: Jean (left) and David (middle). 1951.



Fig. 4: Ruth and her father. 1949.



Fig. 5: Joyce Mary Maxwell (second from right) receives her MBE at Buckingham Palace, accompanied by her three children, including Ruth (left). 1997.



War Widows' Stories

History. Memories. Heritage.

An Interview with Mary Moreland

23 June 2017

Conducted by Ailbhe McDaid



The War Widows'
Association
of Great Britain



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To do so, and for any other questions about this interview, how you may use it, or about the project, please contact Dr Nadine Muller via email (info@warwidowsstories.org.uk), or by post at the following addressing: John Foster Building, Liverpool John Moores University, 80-98 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, L3 5UZ.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

I = Interviewer

R = Respondent / Interviewee

[] = Clarification note

I: So it's Friday the 23rd June 2017, conducting an interview for the War Widows' Stories project with Mary Moreland in the company of Ailbhe McDaid. So, for the record, can you state your name, please?

R: Mary Moreland.

I: Your place of birth?

R: Kilkeel.

I: That's great. Thanks, Mary. So, we might begin by asking you to tell us about your life right now, at the moment.

R: Well, at the moment, it's very busy. On the 8th April, I was elected or nominated to be the Chairman of the War Widows' Association. I retired on the 31st from the Civil Service, 31st March this year, to take up the role as Chairman. It has been very, very hectic, very busy taking over. You think you know what's happening, but you really don't. It's one of those things that you have meetings here, meetings there, meetings everywhere, and it's trying to link up and coordinate travel. Probably it's easier for me to travel from Northern Ireland across than it was for the last Chairman or for other people in different parts of the UK. I'm also involved at home in Northern Ireland with the Commission for Victims and Survivors Forum, which is basically focused on victims and survivors of the Troubles. That's a very new role. It's a very different role to what I'm doing, both voluntary roles. Also at home, I'm a member of the Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee, and that's again focused on veterans, but much more on veterans, while war widows are part of the veterans' community, the Veterans Advisory Pensions Committee is very much focused on the veteran, serving soldier, that has become a veteran after leaving.

I: So you have plenty on your plate.

R: Quite a lot on my plate.

I: So, maybe we'll go back to your childhood and early life. Can you tell me where you were born, and about your family?

R: It's very normal. Born in Kilkeel, grew up in Kilkeel. I grew up in Kilkeel. I'm the baby, two older sisters, Mum, Dad. There is quite a gap between my oldest sister, who is now a rector in Belfast, and my middle sister and myself because my mum had TB [Tuberculosis], so there was a little gap there when she was very ill. Very, very normal childhood. Very happy childhood, I don't remember anything dramatic. Well I suppose, I was about six I suppose, when my mum and dad had an accident. They had been on a scooter, and they had an accident. Basically, we were shipped off to aunts to live with them for the length of time. At that stage, you didn't realise how bad the accident was because you were young. It was an era when people probably protected children. You weren't told of things, so we stayed with aunts and that.

But no, it was a very normal childhood. We went to the local school, local primary school, local high school, all on the same campus, played hockey for the school. Probably much more interested in sports than I was in academia, and very, very, very happy, from what I remember.

I: Did you go on to further education after school or into training?

R: No, I left school after O Level with one O Level in Biology, which was very much use, not! Basically, no. I left school and went into the Civil Service. I didn't go on to further education. That came later. Then at that stage, I met my husband and had a family and went through that, but no, it was just get out, get to work. That was me more than my parents. I think they would have encouraged me to go on to education.

I: Did you meet your husband soon after you left school?

R: It was a bit strange because obviously you have friends at school, and one of my best girlfriends, she was going out with this chap, and he had a friend, so it was, I suppose, a blind date, really. We went out and we hit it off, and we just took it from there. I suppose, being young, you're ... I was going to say naïve. Well, I suppose naïve might be the word. I don't regret any of it. Looking back, I don't regret any of it, but you may have done things differently, but then you don't know these things at that time. So yes, we met, and then we married and we had the children.

I: Did you stay in the same town or nearby?

R: Well, John lived in Clough at the time, so we married in Kilkeel and then we went to live in Clough, which is nineteen miles, twenty miles from Kilkeel. Still a very small village community. Kilkeel is probably a fishing town, Clough a very small village. That's where the children grew up and went to school, and that's where he lived and we lived. Life just went on as normal.

I: You mentioned you had some children.

R: Yes, two. A girl and a boy. They went to the local primary school and then, from there, on to high schools and ended up eventually going to the same high school that I went to.

I: Your husband, John, was he a member of the Army?

R: Well, he had been for some time. He'd been a member of the Territorial Army and then the Ulster Defence Regiment on and off, alternating between the two. But, basically, he worked for the ... I can't remember the name now, it's not coming to me ... but a coal merchant. Times changed, and they were, I suppose, rationalising, as businesses do.

So, he had the opportunity of buying into the business, buying his own business, or buying his section of the business off. So he bought the business, and he ended up being a coal merchant and continued delivering to the people he delivered to.

He also then was part-time in the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR). I also served from about '84 to '87. I did about three years, so I knew a lot of the makeup of the Ulster Defence Regiment in Third County Down Battalion. So it was very much you do your day job, and then you go down, and you go out on a patrol at night because of the circumstances, obviously, in Northern Ireland at that time. You were contributing to the community in both ways. You were serving them during the day and serving them at night.

I: Was that a common thing for people to be part-time members of the army?

R: Very much so, in certain communities. There would have been a few that lived in the same vicinity where we lived and in other places, so it would have been very tight. Because of the situation in Northern Ireland at that stage, you tended to socialise with people that you worked with, so the social aspect of our life was really around the Ulster Defence Regiment and the chaps that served. It was very much within that community.

I: So you were still working in the Civil Service at this time, or were you at home with the children?

R: No. I had given up, looking after the children. Fortunately, I was able to look after the children, give up work, and look after the children. I did a few different things as the children grew up and went to school. I worked in the local petrol station for a while. I actually was working when John was killed. I was working in the local primary school, where my son was still attending, helping in the kitchen. My mother-in-law was the caretaker of the primary school, so when she wasn't able to do that, you would have helped out, or when the other lady, Mrs Mills, wasn't able to do her job, you would have helped out. So it was very much a local community, a local school. It's very much changed now.

I've been down there recently, and it looks like a fantastic big school now. But it was very much part of the community. Because the Ballykilner camp where we served was about three and a half miles away, there were a lot of children from the camp. Usually officers' children would have come when they were here for their two-year term or whatever, two-year post thing, they would have gone to the school. So my son and daughter, they got very friendly with a lot of the children from army backgrounds.

I: So there was quite a military community there?

R: There would have been quite a military community in the sense that I suppose it was a safe community for them to be out, if anything in Northern Ireland at that stage was safe.

I: So you mentioned there that you were working the day that your husband was killed. Would you be able to tell me a little bit about that day and the circumstances of his death?

R: If you go back to the situation in Northern Ireland at that stage, you lived with this ... Because we were both in the Ulster Defence Regiment, and because I had left at that stage, and because John was still in the UDR, you'd lived with it for quite a while. The children had lived with it. I mean my father commented about [my children] having to look under the car. It was just a natural thing that you did. So you did these things, and

you lived with it. You checked under your car, you were always aware of what was happening. It was a Friday morning, and the children were breaking up from school that day. It was nine days before Christmas, so they were breaking up for their Christmas holidays. John had left that morning, about 7:30AM, as he would have done just to go on his rounds. I had got the children prepared. [My daughter] went off to her school, to high school. She was in Castlewellan at that stage. I'd left [my son] to the primary school.

I had gone. I was working in the kitchen. I was preparing lunch, and it must have been about 10:30AMish you're talking, and the headmistress of the school came 'round to the kitchen door. If you picture the scene: I'm there in my overalls and rubber gloves, probably peeling potatoes or something, up to my elbows in whatever it was, preparing the lunch for the children. The headmistress came to the door and said, "Mary, could you come with me?" It's funny, I would normally be the sort of person who would [think], "Oh, I'm in trouble now," sort of thing, but there was something that day in her manner that I thought, "This is a bit unusual". So I took my gloves off and went to the door with her and walked round the outside of the school. As I walked round, I don't actually recall noticing the police car, but it must have been sitting there because we walked round and I just said to her and her manner, I said something about, "Is it Daddy?" because I mean Daddy at that stage would have been mid-70s probably.

So, it was like, "Is it Daddy?" because my mum had died previously. She said, "No". I remember turning the corner of the school and seeing two policemen, and they must have been twelve, if they were a day. I mean they seemed to be extremely young. When I saw them, you instantly knew because you'd lived with this threat forever. Well, it seemed forever. We knew John was high risk. He would have been high risk for the IRA. I remember saying to the policeman, "Where did they get him?" I think the policeman was taken aback that I instantly knew. I remember asking, "Is he dead?", but I don't think I had any doubt at that stage. My understanding was the incident happened about 10:25AM. I mean in hindsight, it's amazing that within five minutes, five to ten minutes, they were there to tell me, which I just think was fantastic. I felt so sorry for the young policemen. It must have been awful for them to come and tell.

Then I remember being taken into the staff room in the school and sitting there. I thought I was probably very coherent. Hindsight, I probably wasn't, but at the time I thought I was thinking very clearly. I remember the secretary making tea. It's funny the little things that you remember because I said, "No, could I have a cup of coffee?" because I don't drink tea. I think they were like, "No, tea for shock". I'm like, "No, I like coffee". So I had my cup of coffee and, in the meantime, obviously, people had tried to get the minister, my local minister, but they couldn't get him, so they got the other local minister. There was a Presbyterian church and a non-subscribing Presbyterian church, so the Presbyterian minister, I think, had arrived.

I remember saying, "No," because Santa Claus was in the school at that stage, this was the last day, and Santa Claus was in the school, it was very much, "No, I can't tell [my son] until he has seen Santa Claus". So, I think very quickly they had changed it 'round from the junior school, P1s, to the P6s – I think he was in P6 at that stage – to let them have Santa Claus first, so he got to see Santa Claus. Then of course they brought him to me, and I explained to him what had happened, as best I knew at that stage. I mean how do you tell a child that their father has been murdered? How do you explain that to a child when you're ... But he was very good. I mean that is probably the most difficult thing I've ever had to do in my life.

Then I had to get from Clough, obviously, to Castlewellan to tell my daughter because, living in a small village, and this came to light very quickly, that if the police hadn't arrived as quickly as they arrived to tell me, I would have been in the kitchen because one of

the other girls that worked in the kitchen was on her way down because she'd already heard. They talk about bad news travelling fast. It's quite right. So, she could have actually walked into the kitchen before I'd even known, and I would have been told in a different way. I think that would have been very, very difficult that somebody else knew before me. I think, obviously, I mean these things happen, but at that stage, when you're in shock, because that's exactly what happened when I went to tell my daughter. The Presbyterian minister took me to Castlewellan because obviously they wouldn't let me drive. She was brought into the headmaster's office at that stage, which probably is not the best thing for a child to be ... "Would you come to the headmaster's office?" It's always this thing, "Well what have I done wrong?" I mean she was very much, "What's he doing there?" This was her brother. Then you explain it again, and you tell your daughter what has happened. For a long time after it, she had difficulty coming to terms with the fact that her brother, who was younger than her, was told first. I mean, it's totally, totally natural that because she's the oldest, she would have expected to be told. It's only as she's growing up and you explain things, when you're able to rationalise these things out, that you can understand that you have to do what you have to do at the time.

So, while I was talking to the police and stuff, they were talking about, "Who do you want told? Is there anybody that needs to be told?" because obviously at that stage the press are going to get it, so you're trying to think of all these people that you need to tell. You go, your own parents, and then John's parents, and my family. He was from quite a large family, six or seven brothers and sisters, one brother and loads of sisters. So it was making sure that they all knew before the press got hold of it. But the press being the press, I think they announced that somebody had been killed in Downpatrick, a coal merchant had been killed. Well, being a small community in Northern Ireland and being round that community, it didn't take much working out. So yes, I mean it was a whirlwind, but I think because I had served myself, I knew the risks. I knew there was a very high risk that we would have been targeted. John and I had spoken often about it and what would happen in circumstances and what we would do. I don't know whether that prepared me more, or I understood more, but you go through a period at that stage where it's ...

I'm just thinking back, and I'm jumping about a bit here, but because it was the last day of school, and they were having a week or a fortnight's holidays over Christmas, you left the house in the morning thinking, "Well, that will do until I come home because I'm not going to be working". So all I could think about as well was, "The house is in such a state". Because Northern Ireland is very much a wake, you have the wake where people come. Even though the house was private, you still have people coming and visiting and passing on their sympathies. To a certain extent, I think that does help, that people care. You very quickly know the genuine people that care and the ones that are just coming to nosey. So all I could think of was the fire wasn't cleaned out, the house wasn't clean, but my sisters were absolutely fantastic. My middle sister, I mean she can clean like there's nobody's business. She's so quick and everything shines. If I do it the same way, in the same time, it never looks as nice. She was fantastic. Obviously, with people coming, you want the best china out, so that probably hasn't been out since last Christmas, so it all has to be washed and all the rest of it. My neighbour two doors over was round and she was sorting the fire out. Again, it's funny the little things at that time that stick in your mind. She had found coal because obviously John was a coal merchant, there was coal about our house. We stored coal in the garage and stuff but she'd chosen the wrong coal to light the fire so the fire wouldn't light and she couldn't work out why the fire wouldn't light but it was the wrong coal she'd put on. It was smokeless for a closed fire and ours was an open fire. So, it's little things like that that stick in your mind.

Well, when I eventually got back home, the UDR welfare arrive. They were second to none. They were absolutely amazing because you're talking in a very short space of time

that you've told your children, then you end up back in your own house. I'm not sure how you would describe it but it's just all this coming in, and decisions have to be made. The UDR welfare, as I said, they were absolutely amazing. They knew there had to be a funeral organised and that was probably the last thing on my mind but I knew very quickly I wanted it to be a military funeral. That took a weight off my mind because then they organised it all. The chaps, his colleagues, our colleagues from the UDR, they would have been involved, there would be pipers. It was very well-organised.

You were kept informed of what was going on. Obviously, there was all the other practicalities of post mortems and things, but the UDR were very, very good at keeping you informed, but keeping you protected at the same time. I made a decision that because John had been killed outside the home ... It's little things that go through your mind, "Thank goodness it wasn't the following Friday because the children would have been with him in the lorry when it had happened". "Thank goodness it happened away from the home because the children would always have remembered," or "They could have seen". It would have been much more difficult. It's difficult enough. There are little things that you look at. I mean my family were so, so supportive. I didn't have to think of anything. All I had to do was just be there, be myself and be there for the children. The decorations were up, the Christmas tree was in the corner. It's a bit surreal when you think about it. You have a Christmas tree in the corner, and you're organising a funeral.

Practically, the Ulster Defence Regiment were fantastic because if you look at the wakes in Northern Ireland, they're very much tea and buns, and tea and sandwiches, and tea and biscuits. So, the UDR were very practical, and they handed my sister some funds so she could go and buy milk, sugar, whatever else was needed because all these people were coming. It was a strange day, yes. It was very, very strange. Thinking back now, there's only certain things that you can remember of that day and certain things that stand out, very, very clear in your mind. That was the Friday, but over the next couple of days, it was different. The funeral then was the Sunday. While it's very quick, that's standard in Northern Ireland, and I think possibly allows for the grieving process to begin very quickly. Because, as I say, John was killed outside the home, I decided rather than bring him home and have the funeral from the home, we would rest him in the funeral parlour in Downpatrick. My rationale behind that was I did not want the children to remember their father leaving the house in a coffin. I mean they were twelve and ten at the time.

At that age, while they have a certain understanding, I think the memory they should have of their father was him leaving for work, happy, looking forward to the holidays, looking forward to having them in the lorry with him as he was going about his day-to-day work. I didn't want them to have that memory of him leaving. That was the way he left. I remember people saying, "Do you want us to stay?" on the Friday night. It was very much, "Well no" because, I mean, what can you do? You have to learn to be on your own very quickly. Maybe I was too practical, but that night I remember both children sleeping with me. Well, I'm not going to say sleeping. We didn't do an awful lot of sleeping, but they were in the bed with me that night. It was a strange time. As I say, I think I was very, very with it, but looking back, I'm not sure I was. I think I was, I don't know.

I: So you mentioned that whirlwind of support in the immediate aftermath and the wake and the funeral. Did that continue then once that immediate period of hectic was over?

R: I mean during those three days, the Friday, Saturday, Sunday, it was very much, well, as you say, that whirlwind. There was the support there. I mean John's Commanding Officer from way back – he's a Brigadier now – he was passing, so he stopped into the

house. There was lots of media attention, which is a bit weird. I think that's something that, I don't know how you stop it, but I didn't speak to the media at that stage, none of my family spoke to the media at that stage. It's an intrusion that you could do without because it's not reporting the facts. It's that salaciousness of the grieving widow. So, I was insistent that, at the funeral, that the media ... I couldn't do anything on the public roads, but they weren't going to get into the funeral or at the grave side. The funeral was a horrible day. They had two sets of bagpipes because one kept getting wet. They had to stop and then change over to another one, the lone piper.

Our colleagues did a fantastic job. and the crowds were just out of this world. Again, silly things that happened on that day. I mean I got into the car that was taking us from the house to the church, behind the coffin, and I must have knocked a switch or something. The radio went on and it was like, "Turn that off", but I had turned it on. I don't know how I had turned it on, but eventually it was turned off. That's not what you wanted. You wanted silence. But yes, after the funeral there was the usual. It was very surreal. I remember my son coming back from the funeral and people being in the house. The first thing he did, he walked across and he turned on the Christmas tree lights. To some people, that was like, "You can't have Christmas tree lights on. You're grieving". You've got to make it as normal as possible for the children. If he wants the Christmas tree light on, he can have the Christmas tree lights on.

So, the support was absolutely fantastic. John's colleagues, on the Christmas morning, arrived. They'd been out obviously on patrol. One of the larger chaps had dressed up as Santa Claus, and they arrived in two Land Rovers. Now, I'm not sure Santa Claus has ever arrived in a Land Rover, but they arrived, and together they had got the children a computer, a games computer. If you think, this was 1988. Computers were relatively new, and games computers were relatively new at that stage. They came in, and Santa Claus gave them this computer, and they set it up. So they gave the magic to Christmas that time. My family, my dad and my two sisters, they would have usually had Christmas in a local hotel, while we would have had a family Christmas with the four of us and then we would have got together later, but we joined with them in the local hotel in Newcastle, which was lovely because the hotel had another three people to do Christmas dinner for and they had very little notice. I know for a big hotel that's not a big deal, but the fact that you were doing it and you were with family was very good. But then the following year you did have that contact. You were invited to things down in Ballykilner with John's colleagues and stuff. They were immensely ... They still are immensely good. But as time moves on, you tend to need some people, and I probably tended to need less support, although in thinking about it, the first year was brilliant. Brilliant, that's the wrong word. If you can understand what I mean. Brilliant is not what I mean, but it was very good and the support was very good. Again, the UDR welfare stepped up to the mark and were exceptional throughout that year and would have organised things for ourselves and the children. You were involved in quite a lot.

But what I tend to say to people is the second year is the most difficult year because you've had your first Christmas, you've had your first birthday, you've had your first wedding anniversary, you've had all these firsts without your husband being there so people assume that you're okay in the second year. But the problem is, the second year you're having the birthdays, the anniversaries, and you're not having the same support from people. You had all this support in the first year, and then the second year you're doing it on your own, so it's much more difficult the second year. I think, when I look back now, shortly after the second anniversary I ended up taking ill. I think that was very much you've gone on, you've continued to do what you do. I mean, I had gone back to work in the school. You do all this in the same community, and I'd taken ill. In fact, I couldn't sit down for a while because it was boils. Not very pleasant, but that was very much your body saying, "Right, you've gone far enough. Now stop. You need a rest and a break". I

think at that stage you start to re-evaluate what your life is because, as you say, you have gone on and continued.

Then I needed to do something, I suppose, for myself, and not take away from remembering John, but I needed to focus a bit more on myself and what I would do. So I'd left the primary school. I left the job I was doing because, at this stage, Castlewellan School had closed, so both children were going to Kilkeel High School. That was very much leave them to the bus in the morning quite early. I joined a gym. When I dropped them off, I would go to the gym, do the exercise, and come back, but I needed something more. So, I ended up working for a local coach works firm, really as the boss's PA. That was interesting because it was totally different. It was totally out of my comfort zone. You learned how to assess a car's damage when it came in for body work damage or it had been in an accident. You would have had to go somewhere, and you would have just jumped in any car and driven any car. So it was quite an experience.

At that stage, then, I noticed that the Civil Service were looking for civil servant staff. There was an opportunity to be reinstated. I applied and, fortunately, was accepted. I was reinstated into the Civil Service, that would have been '91, so that's, what, three years after John was killed. In one way, that was refreshing. Frightening, but refreshing in that you became your own person because you were working with people who didn't know your circumstances. It was my choice whether I told them my circumstances or not. Therefore, because the assumption, obviously, if you don't have a husband and you have two children, you're either divorced or a single parent because people don't instantly think widow.

As I say, it was refreshing to be in a work environment where people just accepted you as Mary, and not as John's widow or [my son's] mum or [my daughter's] mum. You were just Mary. So, in a way, I think that was a good move to do that. Not that you want to reject the community that was so supportive around you, and that's not what you were doing, but it could have become very easy to just stay not doing anything for me. I think it was a healthier relationship with the children, the fact that I was me, I wasn't any longer their daddy's widow. So I was a person in my own right again. From that, then, the Civil Service that I went through, I got promoted. There was a moratorium for a while, so you weren't able to progress, but any promotion board I went on I managed to be successful. They had a very good programme of further education and assistance to study.

At that stage, then, I went and did my Business Studies degree, and I did my Master's in Counselling and Therapeutic Communication. My manager at the time wanted me to do a Master's in Public Administration, but I couldn't think of anything more boring. I had to come up very quickly with another one that used transferable skills. I mean, counselling and therapeutic communication has very transferable skills and knowledge to management and senior management. From that I've always had the bug to do something different and not be afraid of change. CIPD [Chartered Institute of Personnel Development] and personal development and various other elements where you take the opportunities when you can. As I went through my career in the Civil Service, I became a mentor. I first of all did their mentoring programme as a mentee and found that extremely useful for myself, to see the thinking behind a lot of things that went on in the strategy. I then became a mentor myself and had mentored a number of staff in the Civil Service, with positive outcomes.

I became an NVQ [National Vocational Qualifications] assessor and internal verifier and actually ran the NVQ programme in the department. So it was very much being proactive and doing things, and that's where I've ended up today because as your children grow and grow up, their dependence on you ... I was going to say lessens. I'm not sure it ever lessens. You're always the bank. You're always the transport. You're always the first point of contact. When they phone you, the first question you ask is, "What do you want?"

and usually the answer is, "Nothing", but you assume because they're phoning you they want something. But yes, as they grow and become more independent, you find you have more time on your hands. If anything, this is a bit of a cliché, but giving back and giving helps. I think it helps me to understand. The way I look at it is, it's my legacy. Me being positive, me being proactive, me being out there and contributing to society is my legacy to John.

I: So it sounds like you had wonderful support from your community and from your family. I wonder, could you talk a little bit about governmental support or support from charities or anything else that you might have availed of?

R: At that stage, I suppose the support that I got from the community, from my family, especially my family, and especially from the Ulster Defence Regiment, the welfare. At that stage, I didn't go to look for support from charities. I didn't join the War Widows' Association for a number of years. I think when you're first bereaved, well the way I was, the military are very good at giving you a lot of information. Now, in my case, I had the UDR welfare to walk me through the information that you had and also the welfare service, which is now linked to Veterans UK, but the Veterans Welfare Service was very good. They had a gentleman who came out – Ivan. He was a lovely, lovely gentleman, so, so nice and so considerate. But because it was that sort of military UDR family background, they were there to help me fill forms in because there's a lot of stuff that has to happen. I don't get a death certificate until there's an inquest, and things like that.

They were there to do all that, so that was really the support I needed, so I wasn't looking for outside support. Charities, it's very much something we find in the War Widows' Association, because of data protection, we can't contact people. You have to contact the charities. I suppose I was very much an independent person where you do it yourself. You get on. You don't necessarily ask for help. You just get on with it. So, I didn't get involved in that sort of charity work until, as I say, later on, until I started to have a bit more time and giving back. You're so, I suppose, engrossed in bringing two children up. I mean the practicalities of that. I mean, if there had been two boys, that would have been great, and two girls, that would have been great. Not that I'm saying it's not great that they're one of each, but it was like one needed to go to the Girls' Brigade, one needed to go to the BB [Boys' Brigade], but they needed to be there at the same time. They weren't in the same place, so how do you split yourself? So, it's the practicalities of all that.

That's where the family support comes in. I'm not sure charitable support would help in things like that, but practicalities, the practical support, came from the Ulster Defence Regiment, the welfare, and the Veterans Welfare Service. That was fantastic. That's what you needed at that time. Again, I mean after the day John was killed, they arrested a couple of people for his murder because obviously there was the whole search and whatever went on. The police were, at that stage, the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary), they were fantastic because you were kept informed the whole time of what was going. It took a while for it to come to court. I could be wrong in the timings of this, but it was maybe a couple of years before it came to court. The police were extremely good at briefing me and what was going on during the court case. I do remember I had organised a trip with my eldest sister and the two children to go to London, but the court case had started so I couldn't go. She took the children for a break.

But the police were very, very good at making sure that I was able to get into court without having to run the gauntlet of all the media and the press. So, I was cosseted from that. I didn't have to deal with that. I was able to sit with them as opposed to in the public gallery. So you were away from the public. The prosecuting barrister at that stage was so, so good in that when he knew I was in court, he took me up to his chambers

and explained what was going on, and all the rest of it. So there was all that support, which I don't know whether it's given to everybody or not. I can only speak from my experience, but I think things like that, people treating you like an adult. I mean, yes, you can be protected from the worst, but I think the honesty and openness is something that you appreciate. After John was killed, I remember saying that I would like to go and see the route that the killers had taken, just to walk myself through what had happened. Now, whether that was because I had served and I had understood, or not, I don't know. But I think the more information you have, the more you can deal with things. The police were extremely good at doing that and explaining what had happened, the whole process. Whether that made recovery or acceptance better, I don't know, but I think it helped me.

I: It sounds like, in a lot of ways, your grief had to be quite public then because there was obviously a lot of aftermath, and the court case, and the high profile of John being killed during the Troubles. Do you think that was particularly difficult?

R: Being a very private person, yes, it was very difficult. It's something you have to accept. Again, I suppose you manage the media, to a certain extent, by not talking to them. They got my name wrong in it. But yes, it is an added element to grief because you're always aware that if you walk outside at that stage ... I mean in the immediate aftermath, there would have been cameras everywhere. I know there were people ... my mother-in-law lived very close to where we lived, and I know the media was out there, and I know the media were talking to neighbours. They were trying to find that. I know they were there the day of the funeral, outside the church, outside the house. Again, the police were very good in the sense that I'd said, "No, I don't want them into the graveyard". Again, it was very much saying, "No, while I think I'm coping, I'm definitely not in the right mind to speak to the media", and that's not the image you want to portray. But you can't stop it. I mean there was interest there.

Again, I remember during the wake actually saying at one point, there was one particular politician that I definitely didn't want anywhere near the funeral because ... I mean with the best will in the world, somebody getting murdered in the Troubles nine days before Christmas is a story. Politicians, being politicians, will use it. I can clearly remember the people sitting in the house at the time, and they would have had a direct line to this politician, and I remember saying, "I don't want him anywhere near the house, and I don't want him anywhere near the funeral. If he does, I will ask the police to remove him". Needless to say, he didn't turn up because that would not have been a good look. But it was very much: I know this is a public event, but it has to be private for the children, and the children have to be protected. The whole way through it, I mean, that was your focus. The children. And they have to live with it a lot longer than I do, God willing.

But they don't want, in twenty years' time, to look back at pictures that they had no control over. They have to grow up with it. Their school mates, their friends, their future friends have to grow up with it. You want to protect them as best you can. So, I didn't [speak to the media], and none of my family spoke to the media at that point. As I recall, I don't think any of John's family spoke to the media either. I know some of the neighbours did, but you have no control over that. So yes, it makes it extremely difficult because you're trying to deal with your own grief, deal with your children's grief. At the same time, you want it to be known that it's difficult and you want it kept private, but everybody wants a piece of you. The media does. It wasn't until 2008, I think, the Operation Banner, when they had the service in St Paul's Cathedral, that I actually did any media and spoke to the media.

But at that stage, then, I was becoming more involved in various things. You accept it's public, and you accept there's a public curiosity, but at the same time, I think the public

have to accept that, if you have two children, that's where your focus should be, on the children and their grief and protecting them from that public frenzy.

I: So your children were twelve and ten when John was killed. How did the rest of their childhood progress in terms of managing their grief?

R: You would need to ask them, but I hope that it was a pretty normal childhood. You probably overcompensated to a certain extent because they didn't have their father and the father figure, but we went on holidays. We did the normal things. You tried to make it as normal as possible. You allowed them to talk when they wanted to talk, but you didn't dwell on it. It was very much led by them, if they wanted to talk about their dad. I think both of them appear to have turned out relatively normal. My son went into the RAF [Royal Airforce] for a number of years. I mean, looking back, you would have probably done things differently. I think you wouldn't be being honest with yourself if you said you wouldn't, but hopefully, if you spoke to them, they would say it was a relatively normal childhood, as normal as it could be. As I say, they appear to have grown up into reasonably well-rounded adults, but then I'm biased, aren't I? I'm their mother.

I: So, did your social circle change, then? You mentioned that you went back to work, and you went back to education, so it sounds like your social circle changed quite a bit. Did you have contact with any other bereaved families or widows around that time?

R: Yes. I think your social circle changes. I mean you don't tend to have the same friends now that you have in primary school or in high school, so as you grow your social circle changes. The aftercare service, the Ulster Defence Regiment, the welfare service, was very, very good at bringing together bereaved families and widows and children. I think, especially in Ballykilner and Third County Down Battalion, very quickly realised that there was a number of young – I mean I was what ... 31 ... and the children were young – and there were a number of young widows with families. So, they tended to bring them together, and widows, so you were meeting with like-minded people on a reasonably regular basis. I mean they were fantastic in that they used to have holidays in Enniskillen.

I think they realised very quickly that these children had lost their father, so while maybe you want to send the mother away on a holiday, on a respite break or whatever, for a week to Spain or wherever the holiday is, I think the welfare at that stage very quickly realised that actually the children had just lost their fathers, so the last thing that these children needed was to lose their mother for a week as well. Most people have a normal life where you're working and children have school, so it's not that easy to get away. So they very quickly worked out that, during the holidays, they would get this group of younger widows together, and they would have a holiday in Enniskillen, down in the lakes. The Welfare Officer at that stage was very much into boats and cruising and stuff and had contacts down there with the Enniskillen welfare or a Captain – I think it was a Captain, but he could have been a Major in Enniskillen – who had access to the lakes and boats and all that.

So, it was very, very good because then we could go down as a family. Other families would come down, and the children could get to play with like-minded people who had lost their fathers. So if they wanted to talk about that together, they could talk about it. The welfare service brought some of their staff down who were able to sit with the children at night. The adults could go out and have a normal adult meal, adult conversation, so it was very much focused into that, which was fantastic. I mean it was almost ahead of its time, but again, things change and times change. The UDR amalgamated with the Royal Irish, and the welfare changed. There was a transition of

welfare, and a lot of that connection had stopped, and it wasn't as easy. But the transition ended up then forming, I suppose, the aftercare service, which is still there, which still is an exemplar of good practice. There is no doubt about it.

But again, as your children, as I say, become more independent, and you become more independent, you don't necessarily need all that support. I think that's probably where then I moved to the War Widows' Association. I was going to say I probably don't need the support, but it's quite nice to be able to talk. You don't actually have to explain to somebody your circumstances because you're there because of your circumstances, so you can talk as much or as little as you like. But I think it's that giving back and you progress through life to give back. I suppose, looking back, I perhaps understand that in the sense that I have gone through the Master's in the Counselling and Therapeutic Communication, so a lot of that was human growth and transition. A lot of that was very much looking at the grief process and the stages of grief.

You understand and you realise that some people stick at certain stages and other people move on, but there's no right or wrong, it's just doing what's right for yourself. As I say, I think you do. Your circumstances change and I probably would have a few friends still back in Clough. I mean you could go back and you talk to people, but I think I have much more an eclectic group of friends now from work and from different hobbies and things like that.

I: Did you move away from Clough afterwards?

R: I did, but not for a number of years. It was quite a while. I mean the children were up and working before I moved away. Most of that was more to do with the fact of travelling, travelling from Clough to Belfast, I mean. I worked in Stormont. So, it was the travelling, and I thought, "Well, I'll move. See if I can find a house in Bangor", because that's fifteen minutes to work and fifteen minutes back from work and stuff. I did, but I think the one thing that I worked out at that stage when I'd moved into Bangor was that I didn't actually like living in a town. I should have thought about that before I moved to Bangor. But I mean it was very built up, lots of people on top of each other. While that doesn't necessarily worry you that much because obviously people there didn't know and times had moved on anyway ... I mean, I can't say I didn't enjoy living in Bangor, but it never felt like home. Then I had an opportunity to move to Banbridge, and that's much more me. It's much more country. It's much more relaxed.

Yes, I've increased the travelling time again to work from fifteen minutes to, well 45, an hour depending on the traffic on the Westlink, which can be a nightmare, but it's that your shoulders relax as you drive home. You're going to the country. It's a summer's evening, you can sit out in the garden. I think, yes, it's much more like home. I can't ever see myself going back to live either in Killeel or to Clough, though. I mean, they say you never go back.

I: Did you have any new relationships or remarry or anything ever again? So, you mentioned about becoming involved with the War Widows' Association. Would you like to tell me a little bit about how you became involved and how that role has developed?

R: Very strange. I suppose it was through, again, the UDR welfare at that stage where there was an opportunity to go ... The president of the War Widows' [Association] at that stage was Baroness Strange, and she had a house in Perth, outside Perth Megginch Castle. She'd organised a visit for war widows. So, I think a number of war widows from Northern Ireland joined the Association at that stage and went and had a visit in the house. It was wonderful. It was a lovely day, the gardens were lovely, there was tea, biscuits, coffee,

cake, all the rest of it. I suppose I came back home from that and thought, "Okay, perhaps I should join", but I didn't do an awful lot about it. I really can't remember how or when or the timings, but I remember somebody saying to me, "Are you a member of the War Widows' Association?" I said, "Oh yes, I think I joined them a while ago, but I hadn't done anything about it".

So I went to one of their AGMs, and a couple of past chairmen and the current Chairman at that stage, who would have been Jill Grigg, "You need to join. You need to become involved. You need to become a trustee". I suppose, I'm the type of person that I don't particularly like joining things unless I'm doing something. I need to be doing something. So yes, I thought I would become a trustee, find out a bit more about it. I put my name forward for an election, probably in 2009. At that point, I wasn't elected onto the committee of trustees. But not to be dissuaded, I reapplied, and the following year I was elected on, and became their minute secretary. I think probably because it was what I was doing in work day-to-day anyway, and they needed somebody to take minutes because nobody ever likes taking minutes. So I did that. I did that for a number of years. The public relations officer, then, her time was up because you can do a stint of three years plus three years, so her stint was up. I thought, "I would quite like to do that", and I applied to do that and did that for a while and just became more involved. The Chairman changed after the three years, then it changed again. The more involved you became the more you could see the profile and the importance of an organisation like this because it's not a welfare organisation. It really is, and was founded as, a campaigning organisation. Because I had worked for government, I had an insight into how government worked, so you were able to bring certain skills and knowledge to help with the campaigning. Irene Wills, the Chairman I've just taken over from, when she took over she launched the campaign, which had been going for ages and ages and ages, but it had never been formalised, about ensuring that war widows could retain their pensions for life, irrespective of whether they remarry or form a relationship because the War Widows' Pension is a compensation. It's given as a compensation, but the war widows that remarry lost this when they remarried. They had to surrender it.

So, this was a very successful campaign in the first year. It was a really, really intense year, Irene's first year as chairman, but it was a successful campaign. What had been going on ad infinitum, Irene, together with myself and the secretary, Lorna, and a number of other members of the pensions working group, saw a successful conclusion. You saw what a small body of women could do, and while it's War Widows' Association, it also includes widowers, but you could see this small group of people – who are volunteers, who have no staff, no offices, there's nothing; it's just totally from home – could make a difference. I suppose working with Irene through those three years of her Chairmanship, it was very much, well, maybe I can make a difference as well. Maybe I can do something.

Maybe I can bring the War Widows' Association not into the 21st century, but we can move it on because it's like anything, it shouldn't be static. It shouldn't be the same as it was in '71 when it was formed. So yes, I think it was just that desire to make a difference. I had been involved with the Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee at home and, through listening to debates, I became involved in the Victims and Survivors Forum. It's all very much making things better, making life, I suppose, better and helping other people who perhaps are not at that position yet, to either get to that position or to help them help themselves.

- I: Do you think that being the widow of a soldier who was killed in the Troubles differs in any way to being a widow of a soldier killed elsewhere? Do you think there's a particular status or lack of status associated with Troubles widows?**

R: That's a good question. It's complicated. I don't know about the status because it's the government that define the status of a war widow. I think there is a difference in the fact that ... I suppose in Northern Ireland, UDR widows, RUC widows, you were living within the community, and because the Troubles were still ongoing, you were very aware that you didn't want to draw attention to yourself or to your circumstances. I think, in some people's minds, a war widow from the Troubles is not the same as somebody killed in the Second World War. I think this is the image that we have been trying, in the War Widows' Association, to get away from. Irrespective of what the conflict was, if you're defined as a war widow, you are a war widow. It doesn't matter the cause of death, where the death occurred. Every death is different, every grieving process is different.

I mean, there's similarities in the stages you go through, but it shouldn't lessen the death because it's in Northern Ireland, or in Iraq, or in Afghanistan, or in the Falklands. We're united in the fact that we are war widows. But I think there always will be that, I suppose, conflict over whether you're more deserving than I am or whatever, and in the status. I mean you do get that within the organisation, where you're not as much a war widow as somebody else, but that's wrong. It's something we're trying to educate, and I suppose that is a big education programme, that the definition of a war widow is set out by the Ministry of Defence, so you accept that as the definition, that it's attributable to service. So, if it's asbestos-related and that has been attributed to the service, then you become a war widow if your husband has died.

That's as important because every one of those men served their country, and their death was attributed to that service, so therefore they're a war widow. I think widows, war widows, do themselves a disservice by trying or looking and saying they're not. But I don't see myself as any different than anybody else.

I: So what way do you see the War Widows' Association moving into the 21st century, then, or can you reveal those secrets?

R: I think if we could get it to move into the 20th century it would be a bonus. But no, I mean, as I say, I've taken up the role as Chairman, and our strap line is "Through the generations. Moving forward together". That's what I would like to do. It is through the generations because it's an organisation that actually I would love to see no need for. If there was never another war widow, that would be a bonus. But our membership is probably about 10% of the overall total of war widows and widowers. I would like to look at it and look at our strategy ... because we have grown, we have grown from a campaigning organisation to ... We have the three pillars, for want of a better phrase, where we have the campaigning, we have the remembering, and we have the caring.

The caring role we do through regional organisers, our network, and they bring local groups together. The caring is done through the AGM [Annual General Meeting]. We have a four-day AGM where we organise things for members, organise events for members. Through that, and through talking to members in these more relaxed situations and at different events, that informs our campaigning. Then the remembering, I mean it's hard to believe that it was probably the mid '80s before the war widows were recognised as part of the veterans' community and allowed to walk to the Cenotaph on the Sunday British Legion muster parade. Prior to that, we weren't there, but now we're recognised as part of the veterans' community. I would like to see that being more recognised and being more widely recognised. People that know, know, but it's the people that don't know we need to inform. So I would like to look at the whole constitution of the Association. It's a very good constitution, but how we can review that to link with encouraging younger members, younger war widows who are war widows, to join, to keep it going.

I mean we'll be fifty in 2021, and if we're going to move on to the next fifty years, even if we don't change, we have to review it and look to see, does it need to change. I think we link that with encouraging more war widows to join, or war widows who are already war widows to join, not more war widows. It's linking through that and just to move it forward. The old saying "If it ain't broke, don't fix it", but I think we should look at it to make sure it isn't broke and to move it forward and to maintain the profile that we have because we are recognised as the United Kingdom's leading representative organisation for war widows and widowers where the death has been attributed to service.

I think we're unique in the sense that we can do all this without being deflected from the welfare role into welfare because there are so many organisations out there, SSAFA (Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association), the Royal British Legion, there are so many other organisations out there that are much more able and much better set up than we are to do the welfare role. But by doing the caring role that we do and doing the remembering role, we can find out what the big issues are.

I: Great. Was there anything else that you wanted to cover that we didn't mention?

R: Probably.

I: We can come back again for me.

R: I just can't think of it at the minute.

I: That's great. Thanks so much, Mary.



War Widows' Stories

History. Memories. Heritage.

An Interview with Patricia Anne Rickwood

22 May 2017

Conducted by Nadine Muller



The War Widows'
Association
of Great Britain



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To do so, and for any other questions about this interview, how you may use it, or about the project, please contact Dr Nadine Muller via email (info@warwidowsstories.org.uk), or by post at the following addressing: John Foster Building, Liverpool John Moores University, 80-98 Mount Pleasant, Liverpool, L3 5UZ.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

I = Interviewer

R = Respondent / Interviewee

[] = Clarification note

I: So today is the 22nd May 2017. Can you tell me your full name, please?

R: Patricia Anne Rickwood.

I: Where do you live at the moment?

R: I live in Brixham in Devon.

I: Thank you. Could you tell me a little bit about your childhood, Anne? Where you were born, where you grew up ... What it was like?

R: Well, I was born, I believe, in a nursing home in Sidcup in Kent because that's what they did when you were born in those days. But my parental home was in Eltham in south-east London. My mother had lived there since she was six months old. She never left because my father died, and so she went on living with her parents. So that's where I spent my childhood. In this semi-detached house on the Progress Estate in south-east London.

I: Could you tell me something about your parents, Anne? When did they meet?

R: Well, I know that Mum and Dad met when they both started working at the Woolwich Equitable Building Society, as it was then called, in 1938 because there's a staff magazine from that time that shows them both as new members of staff in March, I think, 1938. So they worked together. Mum was a secretary in the ... I can't remember her department. Dad was also a clerk there. He'd just not long left school I think.

I: Where was your mother from? Where had she grown up?

R: So, she grew up in the same house that was my childhood home. She was born actually in the next street, in a road called Granby Road in Eltham, south-east London. Then, when she was six months old, they moved to the house, this semi-detached house around the corner, and then that was where she lived all the time. The houses had been built for workers at the Woolwich Arsenal. My grandfather, her father, was a carpenter who worked at the Woolwich Arsenal, which was a munitions factory in those days. So that was how they came to have this house, which they rented from what was called the

Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society. It was fairly new. I think it was built in 1917, so I think almost all their time, for nearly 100 years, that house was occupied by my family.

I: What was your mother's name, Anne?

R: Patricia Starr Vicary. I don't know where the Starr comes from at all. Star with two Rs. I have no idea why they called her that, but she hated it because there's a Christmas carol, "We Three Kings", which has "star of wonder, star of night" in, and she always felt that she was being teased when that was sung. She hated that, but that was her name, yes. My grandfather was from Cornwall I think and my grandmother from Kent.

I: When was your mother born?

R: 1918, in March, March the 2nd, just before the end of the First World War.

I: So she was 20 when she met your father at work?

R: She was indeed, yes. It was, I think, her second job. She worked in a canteen that was something to do with the actual barracks in Woolwich, which is near Eltham, at the time. One thing about Mum was that Granddad, being a carpenter, one of the things he did was when Mum was about twelve, he went down to Cornwall and for his sister he was building a cafe. They were living in a very damp place, and my mother got rheumatic fever. So, she missed a lot of schooling when she was about twelve, and they told her that she must never work in London. They actually told her she must never have children. So, she had to find a local job. She obviously didn't worry about them not having children. It's quite amusing, really, that when Mum eventually died, they said she'd always have a weak heart because of the rheumatic fever. When she eventually died at the age of 93, she was blind, deaf, and immobile, but the one thing that was not weak about her was her heart.

I: Did she ever tell you anything about their courtship when they met at work? Where did it go from there?

R: Not a lot, but I know they used to go to dances. I think there was a pub up the top of the road. This road was called Arsenal Road because it was to do with the Woolwich Arsenal, the munitions factory. At the top of the road, there was a pub called the Welcome Inn. I think they used to have dances because I know that Mum had some rather beautiful dresses. They used to dress very formally for these things. Not all that long ago, still in her lifetime, I remember taking some of these dresses to a theatrical costumier to pass them on to them because they were full length dresses made of silk and taffeta and stuff. She used to dress up like this on a Saturday night and go dancing with Dad. But Dad was in the Territorial Army before the war. He went to a school called the Roan School where they had a cadet force, I think. So, I think he must have joined up there while he was still at school.

So, he was actually pretty much in the Army all the time they knew each other, so I don't think there was an awful lot of time for a social life. In fact, one of the funny stories that I found recently, I eventually borrowed my father's log books back from the museum that my mother had given them to in the 60s, without ever showing them to me. Looking at what my father was doing in 1943, September, he didn't seem to be at home at all. So quite how I come to be here at all, I really don't know. They were only married for two and a half years and I don't think they really had very much time together in that time. Certainly, my father's relatives who are still alive, they were very young at the time and they hardly knew him because they said as soon as they were old enough to get to know him, he'd gone away to fight.

I: So the war broke out a year off your parents meeting?

R: Really, yes. About eighteen months, yes. They married in '42. Mum's birthday was March 2nd and they married on March 7th.³⁶ Dad had started out in, I think, a regiment called the Royal West Kent but, like quite a lot of other people that I've met since, I think people in the 40s felt that the war wasn't really going anywhere and quite a few people decided to join up with the Glider Pilot Regiment when it was formed, which was actually the week before Mum and Dad married, in February 1942. So Dad had joined the Glider Pilot Regiment, so he was off training, learning to fly pretty much as soon as they married.

I: Did they ever tell you anything about their wedding day?

R: I have photographs of that, yes. Because it was in the war, of course, the things that I know are that it was quite hard to get ... You had coupons for everything you bought, so getting coupons to make a wedding dress and bridesmaids dresses was not easy. I do actually have Mum's wedding dress still. I'm trying to keep just the things that I think might be of interest in the future. It came from a shop called Marshall & Snellgrove. It's in the original box. She was incredibly thin. I used to be able to get into some of her dresses, but never that one. She bought that dress, but I think the bridesmaids' dresses, there were three bridesmaids I think, a friend and my father's sister, older sister I think were bridesmaids. There might have been a third one. Then a tiny one was my father's young sister who was only about eight at the time. The other thing I know that made it difficult, apart from the dresses, was the cake. I think they couldn't have white icing.

They had to have a chocolate cake because you couldn't get a white iced cake in those days. They just had the reception at home, at the house where her parents lived. They were married in St Luke's Church, Eltham Park, which is just around the corner from the house. I think it was quite cold. I think my father was in uniform. I don't know who the best man was. I've got a picture, but I don't know his name. But yes, it was quite a small affair because it being in the middle of the war by then.

I: What happened then once they got married?

R: So they had a very short honeymoon in a place called Cotford Hall in Bournemouth. It's by the sea, obviously, Bournemouth, but they couldn't get anywhere near the beach because all the beaches were covered with barbed wire in case of invasion. But I have some photos of where they spent their honeymoon. Some years ago, in the 80s, I did take Mum back and we stayed there at this Cotford Hall the night before she was going to fly from Hurn Airport at Southampton. So she has been back to see it once, but it was only a very, very tiny honeymoon, only just about four days I think. After that she never had an independent home. When Dad was home from leave, he would go to the house in Eltham to stay there or he'd go and visit his own parents who were over in Charlton, which is another little town in south London, about three miles away. I think he got on very well with my mother's father, so he quite liked coming to the house, but how much time they spent there I have no idea.

Occasionally I think they did try to get a few days in other places. I remember Mum telling me about small trip they made to Marlow in Buckinghamshire, but it was very difficult for Dad. He never had very much time off and he had to try and fit in Mum and his own parents as well. So in the two and a half years they had, I don't suppose they had very much time together really.

³⁶ See Fig. 1.

I: Did your mum ever tell you what it was like for her day-to-day during those two years?

R: Not really. The only knowledge I really have about their relationship, my mum idolised my dad terrifically. One of the sadnesses to me is that I've never met anyone really who knew him. I've met a few people who knew him a bit and, with these log books that I borrowed back, I found the names of people he'd trained with. I wish I'd been able to find these people sooner because I'm sure they're probably now all very old or dead. But it would have been lovely just to find out, to talk to someone who could tell me anything about what my dad was like. But to my mum he was absolutely like a saint. I suppose that's the way it goes when someone is no longer with you, they become more and more idolised. Certainly, one of the quite surprising things that happened to me after my mum went finally into care – because I discovered that she was blind and it wasn't safe for her to live alone anymore – I was clearing this house in which she had lived for ninety years. The last thing I found almost was a box of letters and they were all in pencil on the sort of paper you see, carbon paper, when you wanted to make a copy, very thin paper, letters from my father to Mum.

It was the first time I'd ever seen his handwriting. It was quite a surprise to be standing by the recycling bin in the front garden and realising I was looking at Dad's handwriting for the first time. I also have the last two letters that Mum wrote to him that were sent back when he died. The tone of them both is just how much they love each other. They're incredibly repetitive about just how they love and miss each other and how much they're looking forward to when the war will be over. Then once I'd come on the scene, how much my father was going to enjoy looking after me. All very terribly sentimental by modern standards, but they don't give a lot of information. They're just very love letters. They wrote every day to each other, but much the same thing.

So that's one thing, I have no picture of any of the flaws in him or anything like that. Of course, as I said, even his younger brother and sister who are still alive, they can't tell me really anything because they were too young to know him, so that's a big gap.

I: Did you glean anything from the letters that he wrote to your mother?

R: Only that he was obviously incredibly fond of her. They were both so fond of each other and they just longed to be together. They were making plans, what they were going to do after. As I said, my mother had bought various things to make a home that they were hoping to have once the war was over, china and cutlery. She'd done a lot of embroidery of the sort of things they had in those days like table cloths and table napkins and tray cloths and things. Mum was evacuated. She went on working for the Woolwich Building Society after she married. One interesting little thing I discovered was that she had a letter from them actually saying that in exceptional circumstances they would allow her to go back and work there even though she was married, but only until hostilities ended. It's quite an interesting statement on what life was like in those days, that women were not expected to work once they married.

But she went back to work and the office was moved down to a really quite dangerous place, right in the path of the Battle of Britain, down in Westerham in Kent. Mum lived in a little hut. I know that once she became pregnant with me, they all worried about her walking back through the ice in the winter of 1943 to get down to this hut. She finally left work in February 1944, much earlier before I was born than nowadays one would. But yes, so she worked and most of the time after they married, Dad was first of all doing six months training learning to fly a plane, then another six months learning to fly a glider. So that was his year of 1943 after they married.

I: What happened then?

R: So they prepared for D-Day, which was the first operation, no I don't think it was very first operation for the glider pilots, they'd done something down in Sicily I think, possibly North Africa. But the first one that my dad was involved and most of the people I've met since were involved in was D-Day. Dad had done night flying, which they hadn't all done. So I discovered, only quite recently, again when somebody pointed out to me that there was a museum in Normandy by the Pegasus Bridge where they landed that gave you information about all the glider pilots. I found a line about my dad which told you who his co-pilot was, what his pay load was, what he was carrying in his glider. I knew that he was one of fifty who took off at 1:28 in the morning on the 6th June because he could fly at night. The vast majority of the invasion took place later in the day because I suppose about 250 of them who hadn't done night flying and they went in the afternoon, but Dad went in the morning.

All his log says is just Operation Tonga, which is what it was called and it's written in red because you wrote the night flying in red and it just put two hours. That's all I know. I don't know how he got back. But someone has recently, from Canada, sent me a letter. They were all given a letter that said they had to be given the opportunity to get back to England as quickly as possible because they might be needed again. But I don't know actually how he got back because of course with a glider you don't take off again, you just leave them there. So that was his first operation. I also know that just before they went on that operation, that was on the 6th June, on the 2nd June they were all asked to write a letter, which was the one that was going to be sent to their family if they didn't come back. This is the letter that I then found when I was going through the box of Mum's things. It's the letter that enclosed the last two letters that she wrote to Dad, that arrived after he died.

So he wrote his letter on the 2nd June and then he did his flying on the 6th June, came back, and I was born the next day, about 24 hours after he landed over there. I know he came and saw me before he'd even gone and taken his uniform off and washed, I understand. He went to the nursing home because in those days you stayed in the nursing home a while. I think Mum stayed in for about a fortnight. I was two weeks early, I believe. She stayed in for about two weeks and so that's where Dad first saw me.³⁷

I: Did your mum ever tell you anything about his reaction when he first saw you?

R: No, not really. Again, I've only really seen it once I was on the scene all the letters were about ... he called me "Little Pink Rosebud". So Mum always thought that pink roses were my thing and she always tried to put them on cards that she gave me and gave me roses. We used to use them in flower arrangements and things like that. But no, funny, Mum never really talked to me about him much at all, not that I remember. I think life was very hard. Of course, she lived with her mother and father and they were quite difficult and rather emotional. Obviously, they all got very upset when Dad didn't come back. I think Mum found it quite hard to just keep everything together. For example, one thing that was really quite difficult was in the late 40s the health service I think was introduced and I understand that something was sent round, a form they had to fill out in order that women, they would get an old age pension.

When Mum got to the age of 60, we discovered she'd never actually done this because obviously she was preoccupied with other things. So the only way Mum could get any sort of old age pension was by me paying the back contributions that she hadn't paid because otherwise she wouldn't have had things like the bus pass and the things that

³⁷ See Fig. 2.

go with the old age pension. So I think she must have found life quite a struggle. I don't remember conversations with Mum very much at all I'm afraid, when I was young. It was a funny childhood. I mean I would have done it very differently. Mum, in her later years, when anyone asked her why she never married, again, she always got very cross because she said my dad was the only one for her. Even when she was 90, she got really cross, so when she was in the care home with carers and they asked her why she'd never married. But really, Dad would not have wanted her to be like that. I think she more or less gave up once he died I think. I mean she looked after me. She put everything into looking after me, but she was really a martyr in the sense that she didn't have a life of her own. I don't think Dad would have wanted that at all.

Personally, I feel in many ways, had she gone back to work, which she was urged to do, possibly even found someone and married again. Life would have been very different. But she was terribly afraid. I suppose it must have been very difficult. It was a very different life in those days from now. She was so grateful to her parents for continuing to give her a home with me. She didn't want me to be a nuisance to them. I mean I'm not really complaining. I had all my meals in my bedroom because she thought I would annoy them. She cooked my meals on a gas ring in the bedroom. This actually caused me to have quite a few eating problems when I was young. It wasn't until I started to meet people and go out with them that I realised eating could actually be quite a social thing. I had terrible eating problems.

Then on a Sunday we used to have Sunday roast that I was, I suppose, allowed to attend, but of course I was so hung up and I hated what they gave me to eat, but I wasn't allowed to leave it. I had to sit there in front of this food until 4 o'clock in the afternoon. I've never eaten a Sunday roast from choice since, I don't think. It was a shame. The impression I got that she was so anxious that she might get thrown out of the home and then she wouldn't know how to live because she got, I think, a pension of about £1 a week and a shilling for me. My dad died as a staff sergeant. The next stage up he would have become an officer. They were going to do that, but he didn't live long enough. Had he become an officer, her pension position would have been so different. It was a big struggle. It was a struggle partly financially and partly dealing with these rather hysterical parents.

I: Can I take you back to what you know about your father's death?

R: Yes. So, I told you about D-Day, which was his first operation. Then he came home and saw me and was around for a couple of months. There's a photograph of him holding me at the age of three months. I was baptised at the end of August. It wasn't a bank holiday in those days. I think it was the beginning of August that had the bank holiday. So, it was the end of August I was baptised. On the day of my baptism he got a telegram to ask him to go back. He thought it was just in connection with promoting him to being an officer, but in fact, it was to prepare for Arnhem, the Battle of Arnhem, which is the film *A Bridge Too Far*. So, from what I know, he took off from an airfield called Keevil in Wiltshire. I know who is co-pilot was. In his glider, he also had a medical officer and another person, we're not sure who that was. He made the landing, went over to ... Unfortunately, he was on the second day.

The first day of Arnhem was the 17th September. He went on the second day so of course they were expecting them by then. They were pretty much expecting them even on the first day. From what we know, he landed his glider perfectly and the other three got out. They were starting to take the jeeps and tanks and things out of the back of the glider and went to look for Dad and he was dead beside the glider, shot, as far as we know, by a sniper. We know that because the first thing that happened to Mum was that she got a telegram saying he was missing, presumed dead, I think is what they said, in about

October she got that. She'd written these two letters to him on the 25th and 26th September that came back. So she got the telegram in about October, but it wasn't until the following May that she got final confirmation that he was definitely dead. I believe she got that on the actual day of the end of the war in 1945 when everyone was celebrating.

I have two letters that I found when I borrowed the log books back from the museum of army flying, where Mum had given them. One is from his co-pilot and one is from the medical officer. It was quite a coincidence because it turned out that the medical officer was the brother of someone who worked with my mother's sister so really quite coincidental. But these two people both wrote to Mum describing that, what I've described about how they found him shot by a sniper. They realised he was dead and there was nothing they could do. Quite a sad bit about that, to me, is quite recently I've discovered that the co-pilot, who lived on until the 90s, he obviously died quite a while ago now, but he wrote an autobiography, which is in the Imperial War Museum. He obviously wanted to make good impression and in that he says that my dad was concussed on the way down and he had to take over the controls of the glider and land it. Although that is, from what they all said at the time, that wasn't true and in fact Dad landed the glider perfectly. All the other people in the glider survived.

As I said, he hasn't got a grave. By the War Graves Commission, we were given a grave number, but it just says, "known unto God", it doesn't have his name on. My mum tried really, really hard, that's one of the things she was doing after the war, along with looking after me and dealing with Granny and Granddad. There were quite a few letters she wrote to the War Office saying, "Couldn't they possibly find my dad's body?" But he didn't seem to be wearing an identity disk. One of the things that people have said is that the gliders were burnt by the Germans. I don't know how true this is, but if so and he was lying beside the glider, he would have been burnt as well. I don't give up hope that he might be found. It would be lovely for one of these bodies that they now find, there would still be the chance for me providing some DNA to identify him, but I don't really have much hope of it. I've not ever found anyone who can tell me anymore than what I've just told you.

I: So you remember that after your father died and you were living with your grandmother and your mother and your grandfather, you said that you remember meal times weren't much fun. What else do you remember?

R: My early life? Well I wasn't very fit, I'm afraid. I've since discovered that possibly that was to do with being born in the war because in later life I've had both cataracts and crowns on my teeth. Apparently, there's a connection and it's all to do with a lack of calcium in the war. I know Mum tried really hard to be really fit and healthy for me, but there was a limit to vitamins and things you could have. As far as I know, I was not good at walking. When I first went to school when I was five, I couldn't actually go upstairs without help. I think I had rickets, which is something that affects the bones in the legs, which is caused by not enough calcium. I believe I was born with infantile jaundice because my dad said what a lovely bronzed colour I was when he first saw me. That was a reaction I did get, but that wasn't significant. Infantile jaundice is not a serious thing. The fact that I wasn't very good at walking was quite a disadvantage and I wasn't athletic at all.

Unfortunately, Mum sent me to a school that had a boarding section because she thought she might go back to work and might need me to board. I never actually did. But they were very keen on sport and not a bit keen on academic things and I was very good at academic things and very bad at sport. I used to fall over a lot and every time I fell over I got poisonous wounds. I was a pretty sickly child I'm afraid. I turned a corner when I reached puberty and I've never looked back. Of course, Mum was terribly protective.

For example, in my later life one of my main hobbies was sailing, but I never learned to swim because when I was at the age where Mum would have learned to swim, it was when they had a polio epidemic. All the swimming pools were closed. Mum, with her rheumatic fever, she couldn't take me swimming. She really cosseted me.

I mean when you see pictures of me as a little child, I'm always muffled up in plenty of clothes, with a hat and everything because she was so afraid that I was ... I mean, you can understand it. I was just so precious, but it was a terrible ... I found it a terrible burden really. I made up my mind when I was very young, really quite young, that I was never going to have children, which I didn't have, because I didn't ever want to be in a position of treating someone the way I had been treated, which was a daft thing because of course you needn't have done that. But yes, I was very, very protected and cosseted and wrapped up.

I: How do you remember your mother from those days, the day to day life?

R: Gosh. She tried really hard. I must have been a real pain actually because obviously, as I said, we didn't have much money so we didn't go on holiday, but she did try to take me for day trips to the seaside, but I was always sick on coaches. She must have had a terrible time. She kept going, every year we'd go for a day to the sea somewhere with her well provided with polythene bags and things. She did try to, within her very limited possibilities, to give me a good time. I mean looking back, I remember more in retrospect in way, thinking what it was actually like when I was there, but I mean one of the things that really surprised me was, when I cleared her belongings from the house, she had a savings book. She'd started off with about £200 and she made this last until I was sixteen. There would be little bits of money taken out every so often for trips and things, but I do owe her a lot.

I think the biggest regret, in my mind, is that I couldn't bring myself to say how much I owe. Right at the end when she was dying she said, "You've influenced so many people so well. You've had such a good influence on people," and I now know that she wanted me to say, "And it's all because of all the sacrifices you made for me," but I didn't say it at the time and I shall always remember that. But yes, she did, she gave up, but that was her way of doing things. That's how I remember her, giving up her own life so that I could have everything, as much as she could provide for me although we had parcels of second hand clothes from the Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen Families Association. In school trips, I was the only one who was wearing my school uniform coat in the photographs. All the others had ordinary coats to wear at weekends, but I had to go on trips in my school uniform coat. But she tried so hard. Yes, she really did.

Her way of looking after me was to give up her own life, which is the way I remember it now, which is very sad really. I do feel Dad would not have wanted her to be like that. She had so much potential. She could have done so much herself, but she just saw her role as bringing me up.

I: So how did your mum make do? Did she have a widow's pension? Did she go back to take any work?

R: Well, one of the things that was also quite sad in a way was that she didn't do any work until I went to university when I was eighteen. At that point, she was still young enough and fit enough, she could have then gone back to work. But just at that very point was when her own mother, my grandmother, started to be dependent. So, she had me dependent from '44 to '62 and then she looked after her mother until she was 103, so that was another 23 years she looked after her own mother. So that was the story of her life, looking after other people. She used to take me to the Post Office. As I said, if Dad

had had an officers pension, it would all have been paid into a bank account, but her pension was paid in cash once a week. She had to take me to the Post Office to prove I was still there and she was looking after me. She'd get this pound week and a shilling for me.

That's why she was very active in being enthusiastic about the War Widows' [Association] because it was only through them, in the 70s, that she got a decent pension. For the later part of her life, she was really quite well off because it was a very good pension. But one of her sadnesses was that she knew that German war widows got an awful lot more money than British ones did. It really was quite scandalous that all the time that she was bringing me up until I left home in 1962, she didn't get a decent pension until the 70s. I wasn't conscious except, as I said, for things like not having as many coats as other people. I wasn't that conscious of it, but it must have been the most terrific struggle. They only lived in a rented house. Obviously, my grandmother didn't work and my grandfather retired. He died quite young in the smog in 1952.

One thing that I'm glad in a way that I didn't have perhaps the childhood that people have nowadays because it has meant that I'm hugely grateful for what I have had since because I know what it's like to be really poor. We were never short of food really. I mean granny was very good at managing. I mean that was the way that they did things in those days. We'd have this piece of meat on Sunday and then it would be made to last all the rest of the week in various forms. So, I don't expect we ate very healthily. I don't remember a huge amount of vegetables and I think there was quite a lot of fat everywhere because I hated it, but no, I mean she made me eat scrambled egg every day. We weren't short of food, but we didn't have a washing machine. They never had a television. I bought them a television when I went to university. No, later than that, when I started my first job and finally moved into my own accommodation about 1967.

So, I was never brought up with a television. I never saw any television programmes. We never had a telephone. I remember I was one of the few people who knew how to use a public telephone because there was a bus strike and we were all trying to get home from school and I was the only one who was able to phone people up and explain the problem we had because the other people that I was at school with had domestic telephones, but we didn't have one. I remember we listened to the Coronation in 1953 on an amazing radio that you had to go and collect batteries and accumulators from a shop. They were terribly heavy, but that was what I remember. I remember the radio with this Sunday lunch. We always had the radio on. So the radio was there. We had enough food, but we didn't have any of the things that you would think of as luxuries now really.

When I emptied the house, they'd saved things that we would throw nowadays just in case they might be useful, like gloves with no fingers and torn tights and things. So yes, they had to be very, very careful. As I said, we couldn't afford to go on holiday, just a day trip in London although we lived about ten miles away from London. I mean London was again like a foreign place, you only went there very occasionally.

I: So it sounds like you were aware that the other children at school might be going on holidays. You said they were wearing non-uniform coats.

R: Yes, that was the thing. Yes, I do get the feeling that Mum was very worried about how I would feel with the other children. I can remember two things there. One is that she always wanted me to have as many pens and things as they had because that was ... I mean it sounds daft now when everybody has all kinds of gaming devices and that, but in those days, the measure of how well off you were was how many pens you had. She always wanted me to have as many pens and geometry sets and everything so the others had so I could do my work properly. She helped me with my homework, I

remember that. The other thing, we didn't have electricity. We didn't even have things like a record player. We had the electricity put in in 1959, which was the year I did my O Levels. I remember sitting with my mum. The floorboards were all up while they were putting this electricity in.

I sat on one bit where there was a floorboard and Mum sat on another bit and she tested my Latin. I always remember doing my Latin revision while they were putting the electricity into the house. So yes, that was another thing obviously that we were much later than most other people in that. There was a little story that Mum told me that I was teased at school because I hadn't got a dad. She says that I said to the other girls, because it was a girls' school, "Oh, but my dad has gone to heaven so he can look after me better." I do believe that actually he always has because I've led a charmed life. He's looked after me. I've left many jobs without having another one to go to and yet I have never had a day's unemployment. He's watched out for me I know.

I: Were you or your mum aware of other children around you whose dads had died in the war or were there other war widows that your mother was aware of in your immediate community?

R: Not really, no. I think Mum actually was a bit bitter. I've probably given that impression a little bit. When people died in subsequent wars, of course there was much more counselling and the bodies were brought back to England and things. I think that made her feel a bit bitter because yes, there was absolutely no support, no help at all. As I said, until the War Widows' Association got going in the 70s, there really wasn't any support at all. I now know someone because there's quite a famous person who was the leader of the D Squadron that my dad was in at Arnhem who was Captain Ogilvie. But he and my dad somehow knew each other. His daughter was born thirteen months before me. He and my dad were talking and my dad said that his wife was about to have a baby and this Captain Ogilvie said that my dad's wife must get in touch with his wife. Apparently, they did and there were a lot of letters.

I have now become friends with the daughter of Captain Ogilvie who now lives in Canada and we see each other regularly. She comes over to England. But Mum wrote letters to this woman, my friend's mother. But there was nobody in the vicinity, to my knowledge, at all, no. She went to church and that. Something I do remember her saying was that people in the street would cross over to avoid speaking to her because they didn't want to have to say they felt sorry for her. I do remember that now you've reminded me. Yes, it wasn't until much, much later, when it got to 2002, I realised Mum was getting a bit older and I ought to try and find out a bit more about the things that she'd never really talked about much. So I got involved with the Glider Pilot Regimental Association and started to meet veterans and realised that these were people that that's what my dad would be like if he'd lived.

I think also, I mean my mum did belong to this association and that was where she felt her spiritual home was kind of thing. But again, it was only the veterans who survived that she knew. She didn't know anyone. My dad's best friend, she was very friendly with him. He was taken prisoner at Arnhem and badly wounded, but he did survive and he lived until 2013. Mum was very friendly with him, but no, no one in the vicinity at all. She did have problems with the other side of the family I know. That's one of the things I remember, but I wouldn't want to malign anyone. She didn't have support really from my father's family. There was a bit of competition there over me. I won't go on about it because it's all water under the bridge. I'm sure that there's a lot of things that could have been done better.

I: Did you get to see your grandparents when you were little, your paternal grandparents?

R: That was quite a problem. I'll tell you that, but I don't want to criticise anyone. I don't really now feel I have any family because Mum didn't keep in touch. She didn't want to be in touch with them. While they're not ill disposed to me at all now, I don't really know them because we never really met. Sadly, Mum was a loner, very much. I mean there was a lack of other people around, I must admit. My impression is that there was me and me who were against the world. It was sad. I wish she hadn't been quite so bitter. I think when you're bitter, it's only really yourself that you damage. She could have been so much happier. I suppose it's very hard. I mean they were upset about their son's death, their brother's death so there was pain on both sides and not a lot of toleration. I'd always be more inclined to be tolerant, but that's from now. When life was so hard, probably all Mum could think of was that she wasn't getting any support and in fact she was just getting actual opposition almost. I mean she tried hard to give me ... for instance she sent me on school trips.

Clearly, she was very proud of the fact that the second school trip they did from my school went to Germany. I know that my father's family couldn't believe that she was going to let me go to Germany, which was the country that had killed their son. I know that my paternal grandmother wanted to see me before she died and I actually, when I was a teenager, had to arrange to go and see her without telling Mum because she wouldn't have liked that.

I: Did you feel different at school? I know you said your mother made a big effort to make sure that you didn't.

R: I suppose I did a little bit, yes, probably. I mean the sort of things she did, the second school I went to when I was just in the sixth form in fact, she made a point of saying that I mustn't have free school meals because she didn't want me to go in a different queue and stand out from the rest. But yes, I suppose I felt a bit lonely too I suppose, yes. I didn't find it that easy to make friends I suppose. I don't have any friends left from that time. University is the first time that I've got friends still from. I wouldn't complain. I mean I did very, very well. Mum gave up an enormous amount. I was the first person in the family to go to university. I have been very, very lucky really because I had a very good education and I have achieved a lot since. Yes, to be absolutely honest, I would hate Mum to know that I've said this, but I don't remember my childhood being happy at all, no, not really.

I: You said she helped you with your homework, your Latin, so you were good at school?

R: Afraid so, yes. As I said, they didn't like me because I was very good at work and very bad at sport. I did quite well. It's amazing the different prejudices that you wouldn't have probably nowadays, but I know the first school that Mum sent me to, which was one that had the boarding facilities that she thought she might need if she went back to work, that one actually closed when I'd done my O' Levels so I then transferred to a much bigger school. I didn't transfer schools at eleven because I wasn't very healthy and everything would have involved a train journey, which Mum didn't feel I was really up to. Because I had eating problems when I was young, she used to not leave me at school, but she used to collect me and take me to a restaurant in town, I remember that, for my lunches when I was young. Anyway, then in the sixth form I went to another bigger school where I did go on the train because by then I was much fitter.

I went in to do Latin because I wanted to read English at university and you had to have Latin for that in those days. I remember the Latin teacher looking down her nose at me and saying, "What did I get for O' Level?" and I said, "85%," and she said, "Oh, I suppose it was a different board." I sound so miserable, I'm not miserable. I'm a very happy person, but that wasn't a happy experience either, unfortunately, because they were prejudiced. If you hadn't been to their school all through, they didn't think you could be any good. In fact, just to finish off that bit, when the others were applying for Oxford and Cambridge, they didn't let me try for Oxford and Cambridge because they were afraid I would let them down because I hadn't been in the school all through like the others had. In those days, there was something called a state scholarship, which was quite a prestigious thing to get. In the end, all the people who tried for Oxford and Cambridge didn't get in and I was the only one who got a state scholarship.

I remember going to the deputy head on the day I heard that I'd got this state scholarship and telling her. Just for a moment she looked absolutely gobsmacked. She got over it quite quickly, but she was obviously completely surprised that this ugly duckling had actually done so well. Yes, I can't say there was really anything about my school days that were particularly happy, no, but I got by. Mum was so encouraging. I mean she made sure I did the work, but I enjoyed doing work. Another thing I do remember that was lovely was she really worked with me so that by the time I went to school at the age of five, I was quite advanced, which was actually a slight disadvantage because in kindergarten I know I jumped a year in kindergarten because I was so bright, which meant I was a year young all the way through. Then I had to wait a year at the very end to catch up.

But yes, she was rather proud of the fact that I could spell miscellaneous before I went to school. She did all the things that parents should do like read books with me, but it wasn't an exciting ... I couldn't do any risky things. When you see fathers throwing their children in the air and that sort of thing, all those things that would have probably been quite good for me physically, I didn't get to do. That was where I missed having a dad, someone to rough me up a bit.

I: Do you think your mum was particularly protective because you were the last remaining thing from your father?

R: Absolutely. I mean one of the things ... every birthday card she ever gave me, it always said it was from Daddy and Mummy. She never wanted to do anything with anyone else except with me, even in a very advanced age. She never did anything like joining groups. When she no longer had to stay at home to look after anybody, she never did anything social. She never wanted to do anything except with me. She would write things to other people saying from both of us, as though I was like the substitute for my father. I did rather feel that I'm afraid. I mean as I say, had he lived, you don't know what would have happened. He might have become quite horrible and they might have got divorced, but he remained in her mind the absolute paragon of virtue that he was when she met him. He stayed like that until she was 93. I was all that was left of him, yes, afraid so.

I: So how did she feel when you went to university? Tell me about that.

R: Life was quite bad really. University wasn't so bad, but it was when I came back and wanted to not live at home anymore. As I said, I really began to feel the pressure a bit. Once I got out in the world a bit more, once I went to university and I met more people ... I went to a London university, she used to come up and meet me and do my washing, which was very nice of her. She used to collect all this washing and take it home and do it and bring it back, even though they didn't have a washing machine or anything. But she was brilliant. She didn't seem to mind that because she felt that this was all improving

me. But once I started to lead a more independent life, once I knew what it was like to get away and I realised more what pressure there was, I was fairly determined to leave home and go and share a flat. I do remember she told me that she'd got a terminal illness and I remember going to the doctor and he said, "No, she hasn't. She's trying to blackmail you. You must get away for your own sanity."

I remember when I left home, I'd bought them the television and I said to her that I would always come home at weekends. By then I'd got a boyfriend and he said, "You're going to regret this," and boy, I regretted it. Every fortnight, more or less, I would go home. The trouble was, I went back to being the person that she ... It's a bit like my dad was in her mind. Not necessarily the way he really was, but the way she'd idolised him. I became like that too I suppose, the little girl she brought up. By then I was deputy head of a school and I used to have to go back to my flat on a Sunday night and make a monumental adjustment away from this pathetic little creature that I'd been treated like on the Sunday, to being the person who could go in there and command a class the next day. It was a bit tough, but I'm not complaining, as I said.

Her life, I mean it must have been terrible, absolutely terrible to have only been married for two and a half years and to have so many problems, a lack of support and lack of money and all that. I don't blame her at all, but yes, it wasn't easy.

I: Was she proud when you got your scholarship?

R: Oh yes, she was terribly proud of me, but of course she didn't like some of the relationships I formed so she wasn't very nice to my face. One of the things I found hard as I grew older was that it was positively embarrassing the way she would talk about me to other people. This friend, the daughter of Captain Ogilvie in Canada, she said she always, in a way, until she met me, she hated me, because she knew, through the letters from my mother to her mother, that I was an absolute incredibly intelligent and clever and perfect person and there was this poor lady, who wasn't particularly academic and not very good at anything, comparatively. My mother was like this. She boasted about me most dreadfully to everybody in the most embarrassing way, but she wasn't, for much of my adult life, terribly kind to me and my face.

The glider pilots and the War Widows' [Association] were the two main things in her life and one quite nice thing that happened really was that because she'd given these various things of my father's to the Museum of Army Flying. I don't know quite why she never let me see them first. I think she was disillusioned with me or something perhaps because it was 1968 when she gave them away, which was when I'd just started my first job and maybe she just thought I wasn't going to be interested. Perhaps in those days I might not even have been that interested, but it would have been so nice to have seen them first. But because she gave quite a lot of stuff to The Museum of Army Flying in a place called Middle Wallop near Salisbury, they obviously corresponded a lot. Eventually they set up a little part of that museum, which is called Arnhem the Price. It's a little room exactly like this, a little room with a gas light in and that we had in my youth.

The model is based on the picture of my mum when she was young and dressed wearing my mother's dress that she wore on her honeymoon. My mother is sitting there looking at the telegram that said my father wasn't coming back. There's a front door which has got number 64, which was the number we lived at, with two 1940s milk bottles standing outside. They set all this up in the 80s and that was why we happened to be down in that area, which is why I took her to the hotel where she'd been for her honeymoon that time because they invited us to go and meet all the people who had been involved in setting up this display. It's still there. But again, at first there was the most embarrassing bit about me and my career in international education, but I think they've now actually

changed that a bit. I'm pleased that they've actually made Mum as more of a representative of all war widows, and I think that's good. I'm glad they did that.

Then she did, in 2002, which was the 60th anniversary of the Glider Pilot Regiment and their marriage, she wanted to again do something in memory of Dad for the glider pilots. She asked them the association, what they would like and there's a window in Salisbury Cathedral that represents the Glider Pilot Regiment, but it didn't say anything about what it was so people passing by wouldn't have known. So, they said would she have plaque put there to explain what this window was. So, Mum paid for that and we went down and there was a little dedication, a little unveiling of it and so on. As I said, for my 50th birthday she gave me a silver replica of my father's wings, which had to be specially made because it was the king's crown that was on the wings when my father was in the regiment whereas nowadays it's the queen's crown so it was specially made with the king's crown on. Then for my 60th birthday Mum gave me the gold Pegasus, which is again specially made, which is the emblem of the glider pilots. So, you can see, those are the things that meant most to her all her life.

I: Where did you go to university? What did you read?

R: I went to Bedford College, the University of London. It doesn't exist anymore. It merged with Royal Holloway and they've dropped the name and everything now. I read English. I didn't work terribly hard, I only got a 2.2. I liked the sun and it was a lovely summer the year of my finals. I wanted to go and sit in the garden. I know that there were two subjects I could have done an hour's more work on and got an upper second, but I only got a lower second. I then went into secondary school English teaching for fifteen years. I got involved with international education. My second job was in the International School of London. I got very interested in the international baccalaureate so when I decided I wanted to leave that job I went and did a Master's on the internal baccalaureate. By then I was deputy head and I intended to go back, not to that school, but to another school as a deputy head, but in fact, when I finished my Master's I asked the IB people, the international baccalaureate people, what particular subject they needed research on.

They didn't actually support me in any way, but I did research on the subject that they wanted research on. So, I turned up when I'd finished this, in about July 1982 just to tell them that I'd finished and everything. They said, "You don't happen to be free, do you?" Everyone had left and they'd got a mound of printout of results and nobody knew what to do with them. So that was the start of my career with the International Baccalaureate, which I did then for five years. I finished up working for the international exams at the University of London, which became Edexcel. That was a horrible experience. When you're taken over it usually is. People around me were dying of stress and I thought, "No, that's not how to end your career." So, I took early retirement and opened my own after school tuition centre, which I did for quite a few years, but now I don't do anything at all. Well I do a lot of voluntary work, but that was my career. It was a very good career.

I had a very, very interesting career and met lots of wonderful people and became brave in the end. I mean one of the things that contributed to my not liking my school days very much was this fact that they really did try to put you down. I mean that's not a criticism of my mum, that's a criticism of what was then the education system. There was no sense of encouraging you. If they could find a possibility of putting you down, they would. I remember that really sticks with you. It's influenced the way I've run my own teaching career all my life because even when I did my Master's fifteen years later, I remember sitting in a seminar and thinking, "There's no point in my saying anything because nothing I've got to say will be worth listening to," because that was how I was treated in my own school, but that's nothing to do with Mum.

I: This is your story as well. I'd like to hear more. What was your philosophy then based on what you'd experienced, this put down pedagogy? What was your idea of ...?

R: I mean when I taught kids, if ever they said anything, I'd ask them what they thought say on a poem or a piece of literature or something. If they were way off and it was quite ridiculous, I would never say, "That's stupid. What a daft idea." I'd say, "Well that's one way of looking at it. Have you thought of looking at it this way as well perhaps?" Always try to find something good in what they had come up with, never put them down. I always remember, I've got quite a few godchildren even though I have no children and I always remember once, with one of my godsons, who is now a very successful professor at Oxford, I said something sarcastic to him when he was about nine and he was mortified.

I remember you never use sarcasm with children because they don't understand. I've never forgotten that. That was one mistake I made. He loves me and he's forgiven me, but you've got to be so careful how you treat children because you could wound them forever. So I always tried to be really positive. When I was in the international school, I mean a lot of the people I taught were actually, you would think, quite privileged financially, but they were emotionally so deprived. They had everything they needed in their room, televisions and computers and everything in their room at home, but nobody to talk to. Nobody wanted to listen to them. I would, being me, always stick around listening to their worries as they were moving up in life when they were teenagers. I've done that quite a lot. You realise that you've got to let people develop as they want to be. You've got to listen to people and let them talk to you. I think I was quite a good listener.

I used to go on holiday, I always remember once I went on a trip ... that was again, even when I was quite independent my mother still encouraged me to go on holidays and that. I remember going to Norway and getting stuck with someone who told me the story of their life. I think I'm the sort of person perhaps that- you wouldn't think so from all this chat- people feel quite reasonably comfortable talking to me because I hope I don't judge them. I've suffered so much. I mean even my life at church, I was brought up in the church, but again, you just always got the feeling when you were young that you were being judged and that's not right.

I: We haven't really talked much about that, what role the church played with your mother.

R: Yes. I mean the church was very important to her. I don't think it supported her much. It was very different, but she remembered very much the person who conducted their marriage. That wasn't actually quite true that she wasn't supported much. There was a curate. He was rather sweet. I think he was called Ken Daniels. I always remember I had chicken pox and he came to the house and came round the side of the house ringing a bell saying, "Unclean, unclean", like you would with lepers, to try and cheer me up. I was feeling a bit miserable because I'd got chicken pox in very hot weather. I think that was the thing, Mum found the priest helpful, but of course again, it was very, very different from what life is now.

When you go to a church now you've got children running all around and they sit in corners where they can do their drawing and that, but when she took me to church when I was small, I know she took a book. She wasn't allowed to take me up to communion. Nowadays everybody goes and they get their blessing and that, but not then, no. I had to sit in the pew and be very, very quiet while she went up. But I did do a lot. I went to Sunday school and I became a Sunday school teacher. I knew an awful lot about the bible and that. I got 90% I think for O Level scripture, largely because of being a Sunday

school teacher. Then I went through a period of disillusionment, as one does, when I got to university, but then I came back to it because the person I was living with was heavily within church music.

It's been quite a part all through my life, yes. I don't try and convert people, I'm no good at that. I know you're meant to, but I'm no good. Like my neighbour, she doesn't believe in anything. We're great friends, but I don't try and push it at all with her because I know people are entitled to their own views. But no, I do believe that my dad is looking at me and looking after me.

I: So it was I think when you already had your first job, you were in your first job, that the War Widows' Association slowly, but surely started in the early 1970s.

R: That's right, yes.

I: Do you remember how your mother reacted, heard of it, got involved?

R: I went into my second job in '72 and all I remember is that there was a lady called Jill Gee. Whether she got involved because of her connection with this SSAFA organisation, I'm not sure. I don't know how Mum discovered even that, but I just remember that we did get these parcels of clothes, second hand clothes that were sent by SSAFA so there must have been some sort of support out there, but it wasn't close. I mean there weren't real people to talk to, but somehow or other, maybe the War Office or whatever, the government, did send people details of organisations that might help and maybe Mum did get in touch. Also I think, yes, she got in touch to see if I could get a grant at some point with SSAFA I remember. I remember a little bit about that.

So how she knew this lady Mrs Jill Gee, but she came from the north of England. I think she met her when she came to London, but she and my mum did have conversations and that was how Mum knew that the war widows were getting started. She always wore her little chrysanthemum badge and her glider pilot wings together. Whatever she was wearing, she wore them everywhere she went.

I: Did she get involved with the Association?

R: No. She wrote both the magazine of the glider pilots and *Courage*, the magazine of the War Widows' [Association], she wrote them letters which have been published and which I have seen and possibly still have copies of, but again, it was always describing something about my dad and the past. There's one letter I've seen where she wrote, I don't think I'm going to remember the story completely, but it was something about going to a service and the priest in the pulpit was giving the sermon and I said to Mum, "Was that God up there?" She wrote that letter to somebody and I've seen that published. She wasn't a face to face person really and she wasn't a committee person or anything. Everything she did was really by correspondence. She had lovely handwriting. That's how I suddenly realised, really later than I should have done, that she was going blind, when it went from, in June I think 2007 or '06, she used to keep a diary and she wrote beautiful neat writing in her diary.

Then suddenly, from June that year I think, gradually the writing got bigger and then it was going sideways over the page and then it was back over the writing she'd already written on. It wasn't cataracts which I had, it must have been macular degeneration. She did actually lose her sight very rapidly really over a period of six months. But before that she had the most beautiful handwriting. They did want her to go back to work. She was very skilled in her field. She'd not had much education because of her illness, but she was very good at shorthand and typing, which nowadays of course it's not any

advantage, but she was very proud of the certificate she had of speed. She was very fast at taking shorthand and very fast at touch typing.

She used to do that, not for the War Widows' [Association], but for one of the little voluntary jobs she did which was typing, before the age of computers, she used to type all the address labels for the Glider Pilot Regiment so they could send out things. They would send her a roll of sticky labels which she had to feed through the typewriter. She always wanted to volunteer to do things, but only if she could do them at home. She didn't want to go and communicate much.

I: Do you remember when the 1979 tax on the War Widows' Pensions got lifted finally by Margaret Thatcher?

R: Oh yes, that was very important to Mum. She was so proud of it. There was something about, I won't probably get this quite right, but the widows pension was meant to be disallowed for council tax purposes. She was always battling with the local authority to make sure because when the first bill came through, they didn't allow for this. She would always write letters firmly saying, "Look, this is what's been done for us by the War Widows' Association. You can't include this in my council tax allocation." She was very keen to get everything that she thought she was entitled to. I think she did perhaps feel a bit that the country owed her a living in a way, which is understandable perhaps because she'd given up so much. I mean that's one of the things of course that I find quite hard to understand is that they really believed they were making a difference. I mean I was a terrific pacifist really. I always said if there was a war I wouldn't fight and I always thought that if everybody refused to fight there couldn't be wars, which is pretty naive.

But I couldn't quite tune in to the thing that Mum really believed, they were fighting for queen and country. She was a terrific royalist as well. She used to keep, in a frame on the wall, the letter that King George VI, it was not original, a copy of the letter that was sent about the country sending its sympathy for her sacrifice. I'm afraid I didn't like this very much because I thought that was a bit easy to say. But she stuck that up on the wall with my dad's medals all pinned round it. Since she died, I took the medals off. I couldn't bring myself to throw the thing actually away although I don't like it so I have kept it, but it's not on show. I did have my dad's medals re-ribboned and I have occasionally worn them. One of the things I've done is the Glider Pilot Regiment crosses for the Field of Remembrance at Westminster. When I go there I wear Dad's medals on the right-hand side.

I: Did your mother go to remembrance events?

R: She did, oh yes. For quite a while she went to the War Widows' [Association] one on the Saturday. I never went to that because I was always working I think and I couldn't really get away. But she went to that regularly and she also went to the opening of the Field of Remembrance before I took it on. The crosses used to be done by someone else and then I took it on in 2003. But yes, she went to that. There were pictures of her when the Queen Mother used to go 'round to look at that. The very first thing she tried to do with me, which was when she discovered I was car sick- it just shows how important it was to her- she got a taxi all the way from, I mean we couldn't even afford the bus fare from Eltham to London, but because of me not being very strong, I was only three, she got a taxi all the way from Eltham to London, but they had to stop on Blackheath for me to be sick.

But there used to be a commemorative service at St Martin-in-the-Fields. She went to that regularly, yes. I mean as long as I could keep her going, I took her down to Middle

Wallop, which as I said was what she felt was her spiritual home really and we used to go there on Remembrance Sunday. She had a friend down there who used to serve coffee because we used to have about a two-hour drive and then we'd get there in time for this lady to give us coffee, a Dutch lady who married an Englishman. Then we'd go to the little local church. Of course, now it's all much quieter because when I used to take Mum there was about three or four rows of glider pilot veterans. I think the last time I went a couple of years ago, I was the only representative of the Glider Pilot Regiment there. But yes, she was big on remembrance. She did go once to the rehearsal for the thing in the Albert Hall.

There was one quite nice thing, when she was in care, for the last two and a half years, when I realised she couldn't see, she went into this care home. Although the carers annoyed her if they asked why she'd never remarried, they were kind because they used to know that it was important to her. They used to go and sit with her for the two-minute silence on the 11th November, which was nice.

I: You said that your paternal grandparents were outraged when you went on a school trip to Germany. Have you been since? Has your mother been?

R: Mum never went abroad. Mum never had a driving licence. She never had a passport. She never went back to see where Dad died. I think the War Graves Commission, they put us in touch with a family who were asked to look after this grave that we were given the number of that said, "Known unto God". When I was seventeen, apart from my two school trips when I was twelve and fourteen, the first thing I did independently was to go over and stay with this Dutch family. They took me to see this grave and so on. The woman came to England for the Coronation. That was before obviously. She had come to England and she came and visited us in 1953. We did keep in touch with them for a long time. Even when I sailed to Holland, I actually met her in about the 80s. Then since I retired, since 2002, I have gone every year to the Arnhem Pilgrimage. I have been a few times to D-Day, but not many, but for Arnhem I go every year.³⁸

Now last year was the first year when there wasn't a formal glider pilot pilgrimage so we made our own arrangements, but a group of us, about ten, but without any veterans still went. But yes, I mean when I first went in 2002, it was an emotional experience to see the bridge, although it's not the same bridge, it's been reconstructed. Also, to see this rather beautiful, quite wealthy area of Oosterbeek, it's such a peaceful place with beautiful woods, to think that that was where Dad ended his life. But Mum never wanted to go back and never went there. When granny finally died I said, "Come on, it's time you did a bit of travelling." Being a loner, she said she'd like a desert island so I discovered this little island called Herm, which is near Guernsey and I took her there. The first time we went on the boat, she wasn't that keen on that. That was in 1988 this year that they opened the little section in the museum and we went to Cotford Hall. We did all that at the same time.

We did that for a few years, until 1992. She would fly to Guernsey and we'd take a short boat trip over and she'd stay on this ... She loved that. But that was the furthest so she never needed a passport. Sadly, in 1992, she became asthmatic. When she found breathing difficult, she was a bit scared and she didn't want to travel so after that we only went to places in England. The other important bit that was important to her, as well as the remembrance thing, there's a place in the National Memorial Arboretum and she heard about that from somebody in the 90s. I remember I took her there when it was just a field, nothing there at all, in about '94. By then she did get in touch with my father's

³⁸ See Fig. 3.

family and with my uncle, my father's brother, I think together they contributed to buying a tree. It was planted in '98 and we got the certificate.

Then we were going on these little holidays and I realised she was getting frailer and frailer. She was able to hear less. She couldn't talk to me in the car. She couldn't hear anything I was saying if I was driving her. In 2003, she said she'd like to go to Norfolk, she'd not been up there so I realised that I could get her across to the Arboretum from there. I got in touch and said, "Could you make sure the plaque is on the tree so that Mum can see it because I don't expect she'll make more than the one trip." So, we did manage that. They were so kind. They were wonderful. They made so much of an effort for her. They told her what kind of tree it was and gave her a bit of the leaf. It was lovely. It's a great big Lombardy poplar in a road called Yeomanry Avenue, which is the one that commemorates the Battle of Arnhem.

A really exciting thing, a great big tree, when Mum saw it, it was about ten feet high, it's now about 30 feet high, when Dad's best friend died, his daughter wanted to have a tree for her dad there. They are not planting any more trees for individuals so she asked my permission, which I gave obviously, for a plaque to be put for her dad beside my dad's tree. So, we've got now the two plaques, one commemorating Dad and one commemorating his best friend Bill. The lovely thing was that the glider pilots decided to have a glider pilot memorial up there, which is a huge stone that was brought over from the area of Arnhem, absolutely vast. It came on a low loader or something arranged by the Army. When I went up there for the opening of that, dedication or whatever of that, it turns out that they've put it right by my dad's tree. We were all sitting in the seats that they'd put out for us for the dedication and there was Dad's tree so that was really very nice as well.

I mean I've tried to keep in touch and I did quite a lot of work for the glider pilots in recent years. I became membership secretary. They closed down last Christmas. They took the vote from the veterans and the veterans agreed they should close. In some ways, you'd like it to go on until the last man's standing, but in other ways, there was about 150 left of them still alive. I was the membership secretary. There's a piece on the wall there that is what they presented to us for the final annual general meeting and out in the hall is a certificate I got. I got the Colonel Commandant's Commendation for my work for the glider pilots. I shall keep going to Arnhem because it's the last place Dad ever was, but I just would love to have known him, known something about him for real, rather than the idealised version from Mum.

I: What was his full name?

R: Gordon Albert Rickwood. I believe it was to do with General Gordon. I'm not quite sure if that's why he was called Gordon, but it could be. So, he was born in Burma because granddad, his father, paternal grandfather was in the Army. He was a bandsman. He was very good. He played the trombone. They were out in Burma so Dad was born there in 1920 and his sister was born there in 1922. She's still alive, but sadly she's very immobile and she has dementia. I don't know that she remembers Dad. She certainly wouldn't remember me I don't think. She still talks to her brother. Granny and Granddad Rickwood came back from Burma and quite a bit later they had two more children and that's why there's quite a gap now. So, my uncle was born in 1929 I think my aunt in 1936. So, she's not even ten years older than me. I still speak to her and try and keep in touch. I did take them to see this tree, but also the war affected them too. They're very nervous.

Uncle Basil has never driven a car. He worked for the Woolwich too. He wouldn't do any training to update his skills. He took early retirement when they wanted him to learn a

computer. I feel sorry for him in a way because I was a baby in the war so I don't remember it, but he was a child. I think the war affected him. It's affected me because Dad wasn't even there, but it's affected him because he remembers what it was like being a child when the bombs were coming over.

I: How did your mum find it when you took her back to her honeymoon destination?

R: I think she liked it, yes. She wasn't an emotional person really. That was one of the things I suppose, she wasn't someone I would ever tell what I really felt and I think she perhaps felt the same for me. There was a kind of restraint really. So yes, I mean she was very grateful that all these things had happened. I think she probably felt quite sad that it was all so late on. It would have been so nice if there had been more. I mean nowadays the war widows, as you said, feel part of a group right from the start when it really matters, but in a way, she'd found her own way for so many years that I think that came all a bit too late, but she was always very appreciative.

I: Even when you went there together, she still wouldn't share anything with you?

R: Oh no. I remember when I was a kid, we didn't have any sex education or anything at school in my day and I remember asking her something about this. She was too embarrassed to tell me anything about it. It was only from friends I discovered all the things one needs to know. She was very reserved, but I mean that was how they were in those days. Yes, I mean she was always very unsympathetic to people who were emotional because I think she'd learned that it wasn't a good idea- I'm afraid I've learned that too- it's not a good idea to show people your weaknesses. I tend to be a bit the same, don't let people see how they can hurt you. It can make you hard. I hope it hasn't made me hard, but I think it made her a bit hard. I try to remember. I try to say to myself, "Don't be too hard."

I: You said you weren't a particularly athletic child and you said you were a bit sickly and you didn't enjoy meal times, has that changed?

R: Absolutely. The other person who she went to for support, apart from the church, was the GP because the same GP family carried on ... The one who delivered me was the father and his son went on as a GP and they were the ones that looked after us all through my childhood and teenage years. I remember the younger one, the son, saying to Mum, "You don't have to force children to eat. They'll never starve. But she'll never enjoy eating," absolutely untrue. As soon as I got taken out by guys and that and discovered that eating could actually be quite nice and a social activity, I changed completely. So now I go back to this little island of Herm because it has wonderful gourmet meals. I mean I have never been ill really. I never miss a day's work I don't think. I had German measles in 1973 when I was in my second job. That was a bit nasty because it's not very nice as an adult, but I think I had a week off because of that.

But apart from that, no, I've travelled all over the world and never had altitude sickness, never been seasick. I've sailed for 30 years and almost every crew person who has ever sailed with me has been seasick, but I haven't. Somehow or other I turned a corner. I've been very lucky. I've got arthritis in my knee now and I wish I could walk better because I love walking, but apart from that, I try really hard to keep my brain going, to stave off the dementia so I do a lot of mental things, like being treasurer and that. I've never been one to do many athletic things. I tried Pilates, and when it got a bit more advanced and you were expected to put your toes over your head, I couldn't do that. But I do aqua aerobics, as I said, and I love walking. I mean, I'm fine really, yes, very healthy, lucky. I take Glucosamine and Chondroitin for my knee, self-prescribed, but not on any medication, no. No health problems. I've got a lousy annuity because of it.

I: So you said you made your mind up quite early that you never wanted children, you never had children. You never got married?

R: No. I lived with somebody for many years, but we didn't marry.

I: Is there anything else you'd like to share, that we've not talked about, Anne? Do you feel like you've skipped over something you feel like you haven't had a chance to talk about?

R: Well, no. I hope I've conveyed the right impression about Mum. I owe her so much, I really do, and I really wish I had said to her that I did. I was too proud. It was awful that I didn't say it, but she sacrificed everything for me to give me this education. It's true. I managed to get a very good career because of the education that she was so determined I would have. I just wish she hadn't sacrificed her own life so much. I have no idea what it would be like to have a father. I can't imagine being in a family with a father. I don't have any models to ... I don't compare myself, really. I think Mum always felt uncomfortable in families that were all complete. There was one woman that I used to call aunty, she was a bit jealous because they used to sit in church, father one end, mother the other and the children in between. She resented that sort of thing a bit. She deserved to be happier.

Very, very sad for her really, but I don't know what difference it made to me because I can't imagine, but it must have made the most monumental difference to her life, not having a husband, not having a home, the sort of things that people expect. They expect to get married and move into their own home away from their parents and choose all they want. That was the sort of thing she was really looking forward to, choosing curtains and carpets and things that matched and all that. That just all went. When I look back and think, I knew someone for a very long time, how awful it must have been to just have two and a half years with someone and then for it just to end, terrible. I don't think people should ever forget. That's why I do want to try and support the veterans and so on while I can.

I: Did you ever get the sense that your mother blamed anyone for your father's death or was she angry? I know you said she was bitter.

R: I don't know really. No, I mean she never seemed to think that the war was a bad thing. She seemed to think it was inevitable. As I said, she was incredibly patriotic. I think that was one of the things she probably didn't like about me because I was a bit of a rebel. She was such a one to follow authority. If someone up there said you've got to do it, you've got to do it. That was something she used to say to me, "I couldn't have treated my mother the way you've treated me," like leaving home and that sort of thing. I mean for instance I think she would have done better if she and me had gone off somewhere. However poor we were, she lived somewhere on her own with me, but I mean she realised that Granny went all to pieces when granddad died so she felt an obligation to them. That's how she thought life should be, the obligation of the young to the older ones.

She probably didn't forgive me for, I don't know, not giving up my life to look after her in the way she'd given up to look after her mother, but I didn't feel that was something I would be ... I didn't think it would be any good for either of us really. I don't think she would have had very good care if I'd looked after her. I think she had much better care the way I arranged it for her. No, I think that's it

I: Thank you. Thank you so much, Anne.



Fig. 1: Two photographs of Anne's mother, Patricia Starr Rickwood (née Vicary). Anne's father carried these two photographs of his wife with him. The image on the right was taken on their wedding day, 7th March 1942.



Fig. 2: Left: The only photograph of Anne with both her mother and father. Right: Anne with her father. 1944.

No. 2/19849 (Effects) Effects Form 100 B-1



NOTIFICATION OF DEATH.

CERTIFIED that having regard to such information as is available concerning No. 2044667 W/S/Sgt. Gordon Albert Rickwood
Army Air Corps

who was officially reported missing, it has been recorded by the War Office that he ~~was~~ ^{died} on 18th September 1944 was killed in action in Western Europe while serving with the ~~Force~~.

Dated this 2nd day of August 1945



Signed M. J. Kyrle

The War Office.

(0263/1556) Wt. 24596/4592 5000 7/44 L. B. & Co. Ltd. 38/5 J 7823

Fig. 3: Letter from the War Office notifying Anne's mother of her husband's death. 2 August 1945.

A Poignant Visit

IN THE CANADIAN MILITARY CEMETERY at Groesbeek near Nijmegen stands an impressive monument to those soldiers who fell during the fighting in that area, but who have no known graves. Among those are some fifty five Glider Pilots.

One of those Glider Pilots was Staff Sergeant Gordon Rickwood. His death was not officially confirmed until about nine months after it occurred, and Pat, his widow spent all that time hoping that she would be notified he was still alive. During this time she made many enquiries of her own, and eventually had a reply from a soldier who had been a passenger in 'Ricky's' glider who told her that her husband had been killed on the Landing Zone. The whole story is graphically told in the Museum of Army Flying, where there is a photo of him at his daughter Anne's christening, taken shortly before he took off for Arnhem.

This year Anne was among those in the G.P.R.A. party to Arnhem, and she took time out from the Association programme to visit Groesbeek for the first time. Nick and Freda

Nicholls accompanied her, as did Rose Eastman, whose late husband, Ron, had created the marvellous Museum tableau telling the story. Luuk Buist, Cokkie, and Franz Stek also joined this special pilgrimage.

Sadly, Pat is not up to travelling such a distance these days, indeed, she has never been to Groesbeek to see her husband's name on the memorial, but flowers from her garden were laid in tribute.

RWGN



Anne Rickwood sees her father's name on the Groesbeek Memorial for the first time.

Fig. 4: "A Poignant Visit", The Eagle, Vol. 10, No. 3 (December 2002)

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