



War Widows' Stories

History. Memories. Heritage.

An Interview with Brenda Hillman

13 May 2017

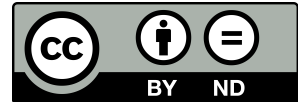
Conducted by Nadine Muller



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.