



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



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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.¹

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

¹ 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.² 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.

² 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?³

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

³ 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.⁴

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

⁴ 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.⁵

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?

⁵ 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*.⁶ 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?

⁶ 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, Auntie Winnie and Uncle Aubrey, and she said, "Oh no, I must have popped out to make a cup of tea for Auntie 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.⁷ 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."

⁷ See Fig. 7a and 7b.

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 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.

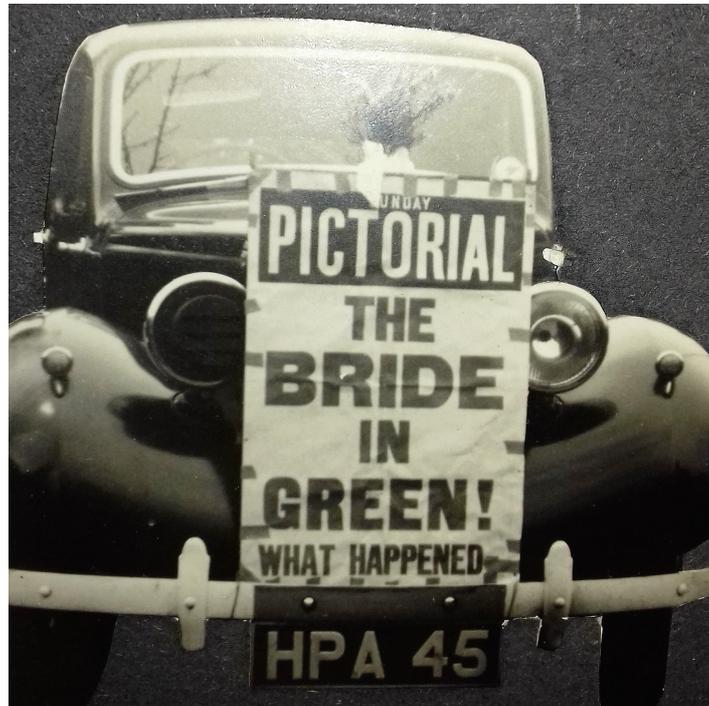


Fig. 3: Headline about Jeannie's parents' wedding in the national press. December 1939.



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.

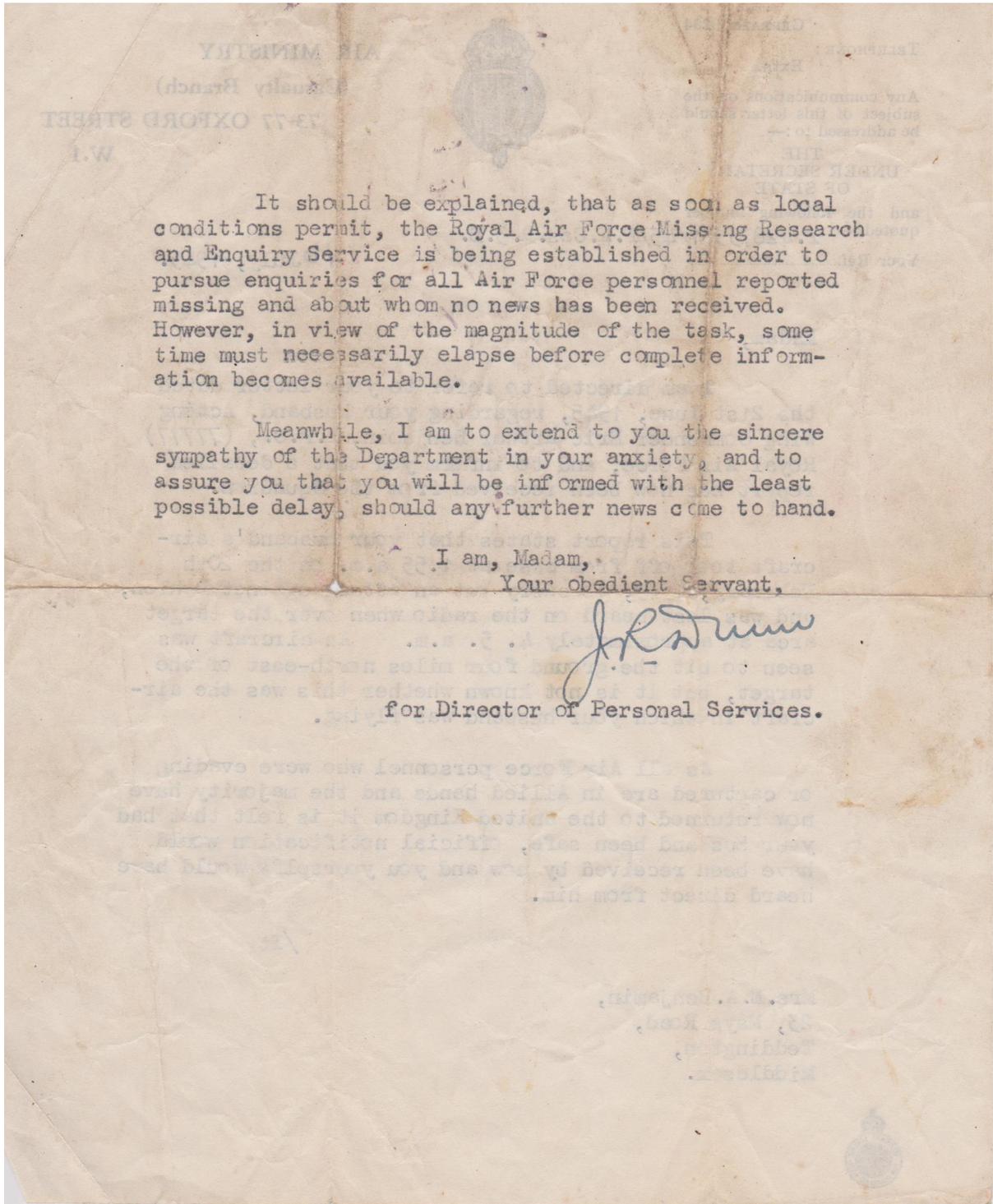


Fig. 7b: Letter from Air Ministry informing Betty Benjamin of the circumstances of her first husband's death. Page 2 of 2. 16 July 1945.



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.