



War Widows' Stories

History. Memories. Heritage.

An Interview with Kate Thomas

18 September 2019

Conducted by Dr Melanie Bassett

This interview transcript, its online version, and the corresponding audio files are published under a Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivatives Licence. This license allows for redistribution, commercial and non-commercial, as long as the work in question is passed along unchanged and in whole, with credit to War Widows Stories. If you wish to use this work in ways not covered under this licence, you must request permission.



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: This is Melanie Bassett recording for the War Widows' Stories project. I'm here with Kate Thomas and it is Wednesday 18th September 2019. Can you tell me a little bit about your current life, Kate?

R: My current life – I'm living in Scotland, though as you can tell from my accent, I'm not Scottish. I have within the house; I live with my husband – my second husband – and my mum who is 95. Close by, I have my two sons, they are each living independently in the same town, so we see a lot of each other. We've got two dogs; we spend a lot of time walking the dogs. I'm a student back into university after all these years, and we are just always busy with family and friends and things.

I: Would you mind telling me your age?

R: I'm 59.

I: Thank you. Can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up?

R: I grew up in Stockport, in Cheshire, and there I was one of three children, the youngest. My brothers were 7 and a half and 9 years older than me, so I was the afterthought. I had a happy upbringing with mum and dad. I had good schools, I enjoyed school. I had lots of family locally, very much based on church stuff and that was kind of central to our lives. Then I left home at the age of 18 to go and do nursing.

I: Can you tell me a bit about your education?

R: Yes, so I went to a private Catholic school. It wasn't my choice; my parents obviously made that decision. Religion is kind of not a big thing in terms of education for me, up here in Scotland there is – I have to explain this very clearly – sectarianism is a big thing, something that I never understood when I first arrived. I still don't understand why it is the case. But I went to Catholic school, I was raised as a Baptist and so that was just perfectly normal. So yes, I went to a good school, and I was very happy there.

I was taught by nuns, they were great. [Laughter]. I don't hear such great stories about other orders of nuns and other people's experiences. Then after my Eleven Plus, I went to the local secondary school – all girls secondary school. But in fourth year, I became quite ill and missed quite a portion of the school year and so when I went back into fifth year, I was desperately unhappy and couldn't cope, and so my parents sent me to a Catholic school a few miles away, close to where my dad worked. So, the last three years of my education were at another convent secondary school, and, again, I was very happy there. Yeah, I loved it. I'm still in touch with a lot of people from that school, less from the other schools.

I: What did your parents do?

R: My mum was mainly at home when I was quite young, and certainly all the years when my brothers were small. She went back to work when I think I was about 11 or 12, when I went to secondary school, and she worked initially in a children's home. She was part-time and over the years she built up her hours and moved into the care of old people. She ended up as the deputy manager of a council run home for older people. She then retired from that at, I think, 65 – I don't think it was 60. I'll have to ask her. So that was her. My dad, he was working in industry when I was small, so he was the managing director of EVA Industries. That was one foundry, and then he had to take over responsibility for a second foundry. So, he had kind of a high-powered job with very, very long hours, including Saturday mornings, so I didn't see... It was Mum who was my carer, if you know what I mean, he was always there, always part of our lives and he was felt very much as a presence.

Then again, when I was in my early teens, there was a big change for him and he decided he wanted to leave industry and do something for people, so he resigned his job and he worked initially... He did several jobs in social service type roles: he worked in a hostel for people coming out of prison; he worked in an approved school, which is one down from a borstal, which was the structure of care, I guess, residential care for children with great difficulties. He worked there for a while and then he ended up working in field social work, so he was a senior social worker. So that's what he did and he retired through ill-health. Then he trained to be a masseur, a remedial masseur, Swedish massage, and he set up a business doing that from home and did that for quite a while until he couldn't through ill-health, until he couldn't manage that any longer either. So, he's had quite a varied career pathway. [Laughter].

I: Did you have any prior military connections?

R: Well, that's an interesting one. I had known that my dad did his national service and was in for two years, maybe two or three years. My uncles, his brothers – younger twin brothers – also did national service. They kind of mostly sort of joked about it, my dad, I think, quite enjoyed his. It was when he was a soldier that he met my mum, who was in the land army. She had joined the land army when people were called up, sort of thing. She's still got this love of the countryside and animals and milking cows and things from those days. What I didn't know until I actually joined the army myself was that my grandfather was also in the army, and he was in the RAMC. He was just a medic in the RAMC and has an array of medals, which are just sitting behind here. He

was very brave. He has got bravery medals and he was mentioned in dispatches and all sorts of things. I never realised; I didn't know. I don't think I'd ever been told of that until I actually joined the army, the QAs, myself as an officer, so there you go.

I: So, you said you'd trained as a nurse, did you go straight into the military?

R: No, no. When I was 18, I decided ... Well, it was a call between university and nursing. I think if I had been making my own choice, I'd have gone to university, my mum was quite keen for me to be a nurse. In those days – it was a long time ago – and I think they were of the mind that girls *shouldn't* go to university; I think they would have accepted it, it was still quite new really. Nobody in our family had been to university to do a degree. My dad had done some study at university, nobody had a degree in our family, so nursing seemed like a practical, sensible thing to do, and Mum had done some voluntary nursing at various times. So, that was the path I took, and then my headmistress suggested that I should apply to go to London, because they were the best nursing schools. So, that's me - I was, "Okay, I'll do that."

So off I went down to Bart's, St Bartholomew's Hospital in London. It was a very strict school of nursing, and I loved it. So, I went from a very strict school with a very strict school uniform to a very strict school of nursing with a very strict uniform and a behavioural disciplinary situation, and that made me feel at home. So, I was there for three years, I qualified, then I staffed for two years and then I thought, "What next, what's the next challenge?" So, through a friend of a friend I thought I'll just join the services. I wanted to join the navy, because I quite liked the colour of the uniform, and then found out that you don't go on ships so I thought, "Why join the navy if you can't go on ships? Never mind the uniform, I'll join the army". [Laughter]. So that's what I did, yes, after five years of nursing I joined the army, and the thing was that, because I had two years' experience, I was able to join as an officer, so that's what I did, I joined the QARAMC [Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps] as an officer, at that stage.

I: How did you find it, moving away from your family to London?

R: Weird. It's not what I had really wanted. I had wanted to train in nursing nearer to home. But because people said, "Do that", I did that. But you cope. I felt claustrophobic in London, I think. I missed the hills and the countryside and just the spaces. People said, "Oh, you can go to Hyde Park". Well, Hyde Park is not the country. So, I felt a bit odd about that. I love Bart's, I think influences were difficult in terms of relationships and things, you know, that's growing up, isn't it? Things could have happened anywhere really. But I coped and got on, and made friends, did lots of exciting things and had a ball, really. I worked really, really hard because you do. In those days, nursing was work. You didn't get very high pay and you worked on the wards and had two weeks' training – training in a block as we used to call it – and then you'd be back on the wards again. So it was a job, it wasn't like nursing is now where you go to college or university and you just do your educational stuff and then pop in for various practical experience – it was completely the other way round, it was really a job that you were training in at the same time.

I: And how did you find the transition from nursing as a civilian to nursing in the army?

R: Well, I think the biggest transition me was the change in the amount of freedom you had. So, I'd been living in a flat in Hackney and I had a lot of freedom. Yes, I worked very long hours and hard work and everything else, I had freedom in and around that, and suddenly you go into, well, firstly, you do, was it 9 or 10 weeks of basic training in those days? I can't remember. That was at the QA training centre in Aldershot, and you weren't allowed home for a number of weeks, and, you know, you were working – there was all sorts of stuff, you know, drills and looking after your uniforms and more stuff, I can't remember, loads of stuff. You were suddenly Nobody kind of locked you in it was very much more on top of each other, and I had lived in a nurses' home where we are altogether for the first couple of years when I was down in London. But in the army, when you are living in the mess, it's even more on top of each other, particularly when you are all training together, so you were all very much collective living, and after having lived quite independently, you know, there's a little bit of resentment. There were lots of weird rules like you can't take your handbag into the dining room when you go to eat, and where you hang your hats and calling people by their first names or by their rank, and so many strange rules to pick up.

So that was in terms of the cultural shift. Another thing, in terms of the actual nursing side of things, was that, in terms of the patients we had, they tended to be, as a general rule, less clinically ill because if you then, when you were caring for service men and women, they had to be at a certain standard of health before they went back to work. Very different from a civilian patient who, when they had an operation, would go home and be looked after at home before they then went back to work. It was completely different. People used to be sent on hospital sick leave, after minor surgery or minor conditions, so they would just be kept on the wards and looked after there before they were sent back to barracks. So, there was quite a difference there. And also, the age profile of course was very different.

Yes, so I think those are some of the things. The other thing that bugged me was that when I went for my interview, I had said that I would like to work in the operating theatres. I knew that they were very short of nurses working in theatres in the army and was told, "Oh great, you've got theatre experience, you've worked in theatres for over 18 months. That'll be great. Go straight into theatres". But when I actually joined the army, they put me in intensive care – "But I know nothing about intensive care, let me work in theatres". I knew how short they were, they wouldn't let me go and work in theatres. So, I felt for quite a long time that I had been brought in under false pretences because I was theatre nurse, that's how I saw my career. So, in the end, well, the only way I could get around things was to apply for the theatre course, and that's what I did. So, I did the army theatre course, my theatre course in the army, which meant I had to extend my commission. There was a lot of dissatisfaction about that, that kind of upset me, in the end, I loved it.

I: If I can move on to how you met your husband and your relationship. Can you tell me about your first date or your first meeting with him?

R: Mike was an RAF doctor and he was very popular. Everybody liked him – fancied him, [Laughter], I think, really. It was common knowledge that he was in an unhappy marriage and that sort of added to this picture of “Oh, poor Mike”, you know, there was a lot of that. I didn’t really know him well. I’d met him a few times because the layout of the hospital was such that... I was, by this stage, at RAF Wroughton and I was working on the medical ward, and the outpatients for ENT was at the other end of the ward so you had to walk through, so we used to share a kitchen, making coffee and things. So, I bumped into him a couple of times and he seemed like a nice guy, he was married so I didn’t think anything of it. Then he disappeared and I didn’t think anything of it because I didn’t even know he’d disappeared. Then one day I went to the rugby sevens at RAF Halton and bumped into him – there he was with these two children, one tucked under each arm. I think they were four and two at the time possibly, or five and three. And I found out that he’d been to RAF Wegberg; he’d been there for three months and whilst he was there, he had been broken his jaw, and we sort of got chatting.

Anyway, that was it and then I didn’t see him again for some time, and that was just a conversation, it was nothing else. And then around the time of my birthday... on my birthday, which is May 15th – and this must have been 1985 – he and I, amongst a lot of other people had been chosen to go on a parade, and it was the AOC’s inspection at RAF Wroughton. So, they wanted a mix of army and RAF people and a mix of different ranks and genders and all the rest of it. So, he and I happened to be involved in that, so we had to practice a couple times a week and just pitch up and everything else. When I said it was my birthday, he gave me a little peck on the cheek, and I thought “Oh...” and felt a little flutter. Then I think I saw him maybe down the rugby club at some point, I didn’t really have a lot to do with him. Then news got around that he’d broken up with his wife, and around that time we were all kind of preparing for the summer ball. The summer ball was always a big occasion, it was like, “Who are you’re going with?” and all the rest of it. I ended up chatting to a friend, the son of one of the consultant anaesthetists; he was quite a bit younger than me, we got on very well. I used to go round to their house sometimes if they were having a barbecue or something. They had a son who was a doctor as well who had a girlfriend who was a nurse. So, John wanted to go, and it was cheaper to go with a partner, and I was serving, so he said, “Have you got a partner?” So anyway, John and I went as partners to the summer ball, and Mike ended up, unbeknownst to me, arranging with the daughter, Jude, to go with her because by that time his marriage had broken down.

Anyway, I can’t remember somehow or other we got together – I can’t even remember exactly, it’s awful! [Laughter]. Yes, so we started going out. Just before that, I’d finished at Wroughton and I was going to be posted to Aldershot, and I was driving home and had a car accident. He drove up to Stockport to see me because he was worried about me, and things really took off from there, just as I’d left. [Laughter]. So, there was maybe only a couple of dates before that, nothing serious. So, it all took off from then and we got married a year later.

I: How did you establish the relationship when you were working in a completely different area?

R: Yeah, well, you do, you do. You get used to that in service life, really. You either make

it or you don't. Yes, so I was in Aldershot doing the theatre course. I knew I was going to be six months in Aldershot and six months in Woolwich. So I guess I was about 50 or 60 miles away and he used to come over and we'd go out or I'd go over there. But I mean, it was just dates, and then we would try and get together at the weekends if we could. But although he had split up from his wife and was living in the mess, the army... well, the service environment was very... there was always this risk of any relationship that was inappropriate, you could be charged with bringing the service into disrepute and that was kind of hanging over you all the time. Certainly, me, I wasn't that kind... that wouldn't have been something that I would want to do and he was the same, because some people thought that they were still altogether or maybe he thought people thought there was still a chance for his marriage to work, I don't know. I mean, that was his thing, they wouldn't have got back together. But, yes, whilst we did see each other, we also had to keep a low profile, so it was all a bit weird, really. We had no money to go anywhere, and you can't bring people into the mess, so it was kind of... we just coped somehow.

I: Can you tell me about your wedding day, the build-up and the plans?

R: Yes, the wedding day. So, we got married on 28th June 1986, so that was about a year after the summer ball, which was in the June the previous year. We... I was in Woolwich doing the theatre course and I was studying, obviously, as part of the course, and he was in Wroughton. At the Easter, just before Easter, I noticed that he had a mole on the side of his head and he said, "Yeah, it's nothing", and joking, "Just my melanoma", I thought, "Hang on ...". Anyway, after a lot of nudging and prodding from me, he had it removed, and it was melanoma. So obviously, we were in that environment, we knew all these people so it was actually done by a friend of his, and this friend came up to visit me, visit us – he wanted to see us both together – so Mike came to visit me so that Tony Attwood could come and visit us both together. He said, "Well, look, it's melanoma. I've only taken it out two microns thick; I think we need to take more out and deeper, with larger margins", and he showed us the histology and everything, and so that's what he did. So, then Mike had a bigger 'V' incision – well, sort of like a 'VW' they call it, just to bring the edges together with this wider incision, and from that they got a bigger chunk removed and he had to have a skin graft, and there was quite a big hole and everything else, so that scar was quite visible when we got married.

I: So, tell me about the actual day then?

R: Well, the lead up was quite significant with us because that gave us lot of extra, kind of, focus and pressure. On the day itself, we got married in my family church and my dad gave me away, and both my brothers were there – my younger brother's daughter, my niece, was my flower girl. I didn't want a flower girl, I didn't want any bridesmaids, my mum said it would be nice for her to be... I'm not one for fuss. I only tried on one wedding dress and that's what I wore. And, yeah, it was quite a simple service by our minister, who I knew and people from the church were there. It was very much a family affair; I didn't want a big do. We went Paris for our honeymoon. We had no money so we just did a coach trip from Manchester. And the funny thing is that on our wedding night, we stayed one night in a nice hotel – Piccadilly Hotel in Manchester – which is

within walking distance from the bus station, and at about 3 o'clock in the morning, the fire alarm went off. [Laughter]. We spent all this time thinking, "Is it your brother, is it my brother?" We couldn't think it was possibly real, it was, so we ended up on the streets of Manchester at 3 o'clock in the morning and we still had to get up at 5am to go to get the bus. So yeah, it was great. We had no money because Mike was paying for his kids.

I: Was his daughters involved in the day?

R: No, they didn't, they weren't, and at that stage, it was a bit awkward with my parents, you know, divorce was still looked at... you know, awkward. I don't think my mum and dad want them there, to be absolutely honest, for their daughter. I think it would have been fine if one of Mike's family had said, "Can we bring the girls up?" they didn't. They wouldn't have wanted to do that, so...

I: So, can you tell me a little bit about your lives as a married couple?

R: Yes. So, when we first got married, we got a quarter at RAF Wroughton where we knew Mike was going to be based for the next year or two. I had just finished the theatre course, which I finished in Woolwich – the second six months was in Woolwich. I had asked for a placing back to Wroughton because I was due for a posting abroad at that point, obviously I didn't want to be abroad when I'd just got married, so they posted me back to Aldershot. So, we were just married, living in Wroughton and I was working in Aldershot. [Laughter]. So, I used to stay in Aldershot and get any on-calls; I used to request two on-calls a week so I didn't have to go... because I had to be there early, you had to be there for 8 so I had to leave at 6:30, so it wasn't easy and you work long hours, we managed, we got through it. Then after 6 months, maybe 9 months, I think, I got posted back to Wroughton, so for the rest of my five years, I served at Wroughton until I came out in the end of '88, I think it was September or October, I can't remember exactly. So yes, we were very happy. We got a cat and then we got a dog, so we had both, pets were part of our life, and we had the girls every other weekend and on school holidays. Mike, being a doctor and very conscientious, used to be in the hospital all the time so I had the kids most of the time. But we did fine, we went out swimming and ice-skating and things. Yeah, it was just a happy time, really.

I: Did you live in the barracks or did you have a private...?

R: We had a quarter, a married quarter in Wroughton, yes. When you got married, you'd get a married quarter. So, as I say, our married quarter was at Wroughton, a house. Mike was working at Wroughton Hospital and I was working in Aldershot. I didn't want a permanent room there there was usually a room to sleep in. It was an on-call theatre room, so whenever I was on call, I slept in that. As I say, I used to request a couple of on-calls a week so that there were two days that I didn't have to travel. Because you had to be on-call for emergency surgery, caesarean sections, emergency orthopaedic stuff, anything.

I: Can I ask you, you mentioned that you left after five years, five or six years?

R: Five years.

I: Was there a particular reason?

R: Well, when you take a commission, then I took my first commission with the QAs, it was for two years, that's the basic that most people do and then you have to extend. At that time, the extension was from 2 to 5, and then beyond that, 5 to 8 and then it's shorter periods, so I extended from 2 to 5. So, I was due to come out in the October '88. Mike was a trainee doctor, so he was obviously a qualified doctor, in his specialist training to become an ENT consultant, he had to fulfil certain criteria to become a consultant and those criteria couldn't be achieved in the Air Force or in the services at all, so all service consultants had to go out and spend time in the NHS whilst still serving as officers, to get that experience. So, in Mike's case, he had to do a three-year rotation. The RAF have relationships with a number of different health organisations, the one he came to was in Glasgow, and that was due to start in 1989. So, when I left towards the end of '88, I knew the following summer, Mike would be coming up to Glasgow. There was nothing in Glasgow for me except a recruiting office and I certainly didn't want to move from a high-powered clinical job, you know, quite a good clinical job into a recruiting office. I couldn't bear it. The closest clinical work that I could do whilst still serving would be in Catterick, which is 3 and a half hours down the road. [Laughter]. So that's why I didn't extend any further, not for any other reason. Also, we were trying for a family as well the family didn't happen at that stage, so yeah, I left at that point and I became a wife, a proper wife [Laughter] if there is such a thing for a few months before we moved up to Scotland

I: Can I ask you about your family at this point? You said you were trying for children, and you eventually adopted?

R: Yes, so Mike had the two girls and we were trying for a family, as soon as we got married and in fact a bit before, really. The rules were then, in the services, as soon as you were so many weeks, you left; there was no maternity leave or anything, you were just out, out the door. But we didn't mind, we were quite happy with that idea. So, we had been trying for some years and still no children appeared, so I think must have be about 1989, soon after we came up to Scotland, I went to the doctors and said, "Look, we're wanting a baby; my husband has two girls..." So we had some basic fundamental tests and I had a lap and dye and they said there was nothing wrong, and then they did some more detailed bloods and it came about that I had, they discovered that I had some sort of hormonal issues that were preventing me getting pregnant. There was no actual treatment for that, so we were offered IVF. We discussed it and felt that that wasn't for us, so we decided to look into adoption. I'm condensing an awful lot we then ended up adopting two boys; they were difficult to place children who had had problems, through the family finding centre in Glasgow, and they were natural brothers – Steven and Dominic – they were five and three when they came to live with us.

I: So how was that?

R: We were just so thrilled. It was so exciting and kind of quite nerve-wracking. They had

quite broad accents, and of course we were both quite English. [Laughter]. One particular thing, I took the boys to get new shoes, to get them measured for new Clark's shoes, it was one of the first things I did. So, you would hear, "Mummy, Daddy [in English accent]," then, "Look oot the windae!" [in Glaswegian accent]. [Laughter]. I can't do the accent! But these children with very Scottish accents were calling us "Mummy" and "Daddy" and it was all a bit bizarre. So, they came to live with us in the October of whatever year it was, I can't remember, and then around the Christmastime, the Gulf War started, the first one, and I got my call up papers because I was still technically on the reserves. Mike wasn't because he was out, in the NHS, was desperate to go, and to cut a long story short, of course, I couldn't go because I had to stay with the children, so Mike went off on Desert Storm on 13th or I think it might have been 12th January, whenever that was, whatever year that was, when the boys had just been living with us for three months. [Laughter]. And off he went! [Laughter].

I: How did you feel about that? Were you worried?

R: Jealous, actually! [Laughter]. Yes, of course I was worried, I was jealous because I was still army, you know, that's what I joined for and here was I who'd only worked in hospitals in the UK. I'd joined to serve for my country, for my Queen and country. And off he goes, leaving me with the kids! But yes, I was worried sick. The boys were very... they had a lot of behavioural issues, particularly the older one, Steven, he had more behavioural problems – very, very difficult and challenging behaviours. Dominic had learning difficulties, so he was very far behind in every way – speech, mobility, anything to do with education; he was way behind and still has learning difficulties now. He's living independently with a lot of support from me, and he's on benefits and things, and a personal independence payment because he can't manage to look after himself. But, you know, he has support and he's happy. But yeah, it was very, very scary. He was actually based in Cyprus and his role – he had a whole series of roles – his role was to go into Kuwait and bring casualties out, that was his role. But, of course, fortunately, there weren't that many. He did go in a couple of times.

He also went to Bahrain, which was interesting because he'd been brought up in Bahrain, because his father had worked in the oil business, so it was quite funny for him to go back there. So that's what we did. When things really started there were scud missiles. There used to be a news programme, I think it was on Channel 5 and I used to get up – because Steven used to get me up very, very early in the morning – and I think the channel started, was it from 5 o'clock in the morning or maybe 6, and I used to sit glued to the TV, watching these scud missiles come over and land. I worried how far they were and wondered where Mike was and things, and I wrote to him every single day at least once, sometimes twice – every single day, he got a 'bluey'. I sent parcels out. He used to ask me, "Can you send me this? Can you send me that?" I was living in Milton of Campsie at the time, a very small village, and the post office, they always knew, "Oh, your husband, I knew your husband was out there", and I didn't know this woman from Adam she obviously knew who I was because I was obviously an army person and, you know, it was actually army quarters we were living in. So, she said, "There's five people in Milton of Campsie who are out there, so how are things? Are you okay?" [Laughter]. So, it was kind of really weird. But scary – very, very scary and very worrying. It was very difficult; the children were very difficult. Yes,

really quite something, yeah, we got through it.

I: So how was it when he got back? What happened then, did he go into the NHS?

R: Oh, absolutely. It was lovely the day he came back, because he came back and he had his hair really short in a crew cut, very short, and he came back in his flying suit so, of course, you know... and he was very fit, he'd been spending a lot of time in the gym in between things. We walked up to school to pick the boys up from school. I walked along the road with him in his flying suit with the kids on his shoulders and swapping them over, and that was lovely. Yeah, so that was fine, and he just went back into the NHS job, because in the end, of course, the first Desert Storm was only a fairly short run thing so he was only out there three months, I think it was, so yes, he just got back into the NHS routine and carried on.

I: Can I ask you about when you did have your biological child?

R: Yes. So, we had the boys and then we were due to come back after three years in Scotland, we were due to come back to England – Well, he was due a posting, we didn't know where it was going to be. Because of the service, for ENT, we thought it would probably be Wroughton again or possibly Halton. In the end, due to a tragedy where a naval consultant, an ENT surgeon had drowned when he was out fishing – he got caught in a current with his waders, you know these waist waders, and he drowned – so Mike was asked to go to the Royal Naval Hospital Haslar, so went down there to Gosport, which we didn't mind, it was fine – quite different, quite exciting. We got there and lived in Monckton Road near Fort Gilkicker, the golf course. Then I'd been there for a few weeks and I really wasn't feeling very well. I was feeling a bit queasy, I had a lot of heartburn and reflux and things and felt there was something not quite right. So, I went to the doctors, told him I wasn't feeling very well. I told him my symptoms and he said, "When was your last period?" I thought "Oh, I don't know". I said, "I've been told I can't have children so, you know, ...". "Well, when was it?" I said, "A few weeks ago, I can't remember". He said, "I think you need to do a pregnancy test". [Laughter] And that was it! So, I had fallen pregnant the weekend of leaving Milton of Campsie, stopping over with my parents for a couple of nights in Stockport on the way down and arriving in Gosport – I'd fallen pregnant, I can't tell you where. [Laughter]

Yes, so that was a complete shock, and it was a shock at first, because we had been married – this was '92 – so we'd been married six years and had been trying a little bit longer than that, had been told categorically it wasn't going to happen, then suddenly it does. We'd made overtures to start adopting again, and there I was, pregnant, so it was not expected at all. Yes, so that was it – I was pregnant. I didn't have a very good pregnancy. I was nauseated; I was never actually sick, I was nauseated, very nauseous, all the way through my pregnancy and couldn't eat very well, so I actually kind of lost weight during my pregnancy, which is bizarre. I also had all the symptoms in the book, that's a typical nurse. Then he was actually... because they knew he was going to be quite big, I had a caesarean section, a planned caesarean section – they knew I was a nurse and everything else and Mike was a doctor – so that was at St Mary's in Portsmouth. So, Mark was born on 6th April 1993 at 10lbs 12 ¼ oz. He was a nice, big healthy baby.

Yes, so that was very exciting. The funny thing is, with the two boys, although they were troubled, they were still our boys and the girls were still our girls, suddenly Mark came on the scene and it almost gelled everything together because, you know, "Who's this one's parent and who's that one's this one's parent?" And, "They're actually, adopted parents not blood relations", and it was all very complicated suddenly it just didn't matter. And that's actually something that's continued in our family until now because.... If I can talk about that just now. We have a situation where my stepdaughters, to whom I am very close, both now have children and their children call me "Granny" and the girls still call me "Mum" although they refer to me as "Kate" because their mother is still alive, they call me "Mum" all the time, they just, you know. My new husband is "Opa", which is Grandad in German, because his grandparents were German. And So, yes, so we're "Granny" and "Opa". So, I don't have any real connection with the girls now except that we love each other, and Marcos has come into that family and, you know, we're really, we're just really, really close. We love each other so it doesn't matter... they say blood is thicker than water, I don't know what that means. My experience has been that you choose who you love, or people choose to love you and if that's mutual, that's wonderful. There's more things under heaven and earth that we can put into simpler boxes. So yes, that's what happened with our family at that point – when Mark was born, it all just kind of connected. So, then we had five kids, so we had a seven-seater. [Laughter].

I: How much visitation did you get from the girls if you were up in Scotland and then down in Gosport? Did it work out quite well in terms of getting to see them?

R: In Scotland, it was far more difficult because it was the cost of flights and things each time, so they tended to come... they came for the main holidays. There was always a bit of a fight over Christmas. We had the girls for one Christmas. The first time we had the girls for Christmas was the first Christmas we had the boys; that was quite a challenge and it was very last minute because of the mother, who said, "You can have the children for Christmas". So that was very last minute. It wasn't that we didn't want them if we had known we were having them, we would have planned and done things. Bearing in mind the children had only been with us two months, it was quite challenging. But yes, it turned out to be main holidays. So, they would come up three or four times a year while we were in Scotland, and that was for three years so it wasn't a major thing, it didn't sort of detract from the relationship. But when we were living down south, on the whole, it was every other weekend and then we'd get a longer time at half-terms and things and then a week or two in the summer and a week at Christmas as well.

So, the relationship was always there, they always had their own space and always had some stuff, you know, bits and pieces. We always did stuff with all the kids. At a fairly early stage, we joined the National Trust for Scotland and the Heritage Scotland. Because those places were great, you know, once you'd paid your annual membership, if you've got plenty of kids, it's dirt cheap. [Laughter]. So, we went everywhere with big picnic baskets and backpacks and that's what we did. We were sort of just There were those places locally down there and up here and we went to all the castles and stately homes, parks and gardens, and all the kids still enjoy

those sorts of activities. And it's lovely to see my grandchildren being given that kind of life experience as well, because I just think it just opens up your mind to different things, to history, to how people lived, and what options there are, so yeah, it was very exciting.

I: Wonderful. So, if I could go on to then talk about your widowhood and your husband's death?

R: Yes.

I: You mentioned that before you got married, you found a melanoma?

R: Yes.

I: Can you tell me a bit about that?

R: So, he had a melanoma and he had the second surgery, and he was told there was nothing else could be done at that time. There was no radiotherapy or chemotherapy that would reduce any risk of further recurrence. There was no sign of any other incidents and so we just carried on. During the years, he had a couple of little moles removed and they just came back as dysplastic nevi, which is, you know, fine, nothing nasty. Then there was a point when Mike had, he was coming to his 16-year point, when he could leave, and he had got the promise of a job up here and had interviews and everything else it was just dates and times needed to be sorted out. So that was all kind if sorted out, and he'd still get a couple of these little things and we'd just get them removed. There was one underneath his chin, one just sort of on his stomach, and I can't remember where the other one was, I think somewhere else on his torso. And as they do, these surgeons, at the end of the operating list, he said to his partner, "Can you just take these off?" He said, "Yes, sure, sure". So he took these off and thought they were just little, you know, you get to a stage – he was 40 – and these little lumps and bumps start to appear on parts of your body and you just think your body isn't as sleek as it used to be. Anyway, because they were surgeons, they just got a scalpel and cut into it and it was black – although of course they had to go to histology to confirm it.

So that was another of those phone calls – "Kate, what are you doing?" "Just going to pick the kids up from school". "Well, can you see if somebody can have the kids and can you come in and talk to Garth", – he was the naval surgeon. "I've just had some lumps taken off and I don't think they look very good". So, I rang up my friends, Pete and Liz, and said, "Can you have the kids and pick them up?" Pete was actually our minister, an Anglican priest, just a pal, he and Liz were friends. So, we dropped the kids with them, and I went into hospital to talk to them and they said, "Well, yes, that's it. We need to get the histology and everything else there's no question, it's definitely melanoma". So of course, during that time – this is eleven years on from when he'd had the primary, so he would have been well clear – there had been nothing cancerous during that time. But during that time, he'd been out to Cyprus several times, particularly when he was in Haslar, and he'd also been out to the Gulf, which, technically, he should never have gone to with his skin issues; he should have been

medically downgraded and shouldn't have gone abroad at all to any hot climate. Anyway, so that was that, then we got more advice and so on.

Of course, Mike was in the business, so he was able to find all sorts of people to talk to and things. The best advice we could be given was probably two to five years, because it was a secondary... we didn't know whether they were new primaries or whether they were secondaries, or what had happened. So, at that point, we needed to make a decision, so this was before his 41st birthday, so it must have been October '96, the end of October/ early November 1996. So, this is where I think we had a conversation with health people to find out what the implications were. We had to kind of keep it quiet... Oh no, it must have been early November because at the end of October, we'd put in an offer for a house in Scotland, which, the offers for houses in Scotland are legally binding: if you put in an offer and it's accepted, that's it, it's legally binding. So, we'd put in the offer, so we'd fixed the purchase of a house in Lenzie in Scotland, and then we found out he'd got cancer. So, we had to take stock and think, "Well, how can we manage this?" Life insurance wasn't sorted, these things weren't sorted because we weren't expecting these things to happen. Anyway, Mike definitely wanted to leave the Air Force, he wanted out and he wanted to get away. Other people talked to me and said, "Is this what you really want? Do you want to move away?" Because by this time, my brother had moved down to live in that area and he'd just got married to a friend of mine, so it was, "Do you really want to move back up to Scotland or do you want to stay down here where your brother is?" We were living in quarters though and they said, "Oh well, you can have three months in a quarter". And I thought, "Three months? Three months isn't very long, actually, if your husband's just died". Now, I think, "What an insult! What an insult!" When I think of what I went through, I would never have managed to get out of a quarter into anything half-decent that would allow me to have some quality of life within three months. I could never have done that.

But thank goodness, I didn't listen, and I made my decision and we carried on with the move. So that's what we did, we moved up to Scotland as planned. In the meantime, we continued trying to establish what Mike's future might look like. So, we came up to Scotland and then he got referred, officially, to a specialist up here. I mean, I would probably tell you too much clinical detail and that's irrelevant to this, because I'm a nurse and he was a doctor and we knew all that stuff, basically, things deteriorated until the point – he did manage to work at Monklands, and he was well thought of during that time. He loved the job and it was absolutely what he wanted, and we had found a lovely house in Lenzie – he loved living in the house. All the family came up to visit us that summer, including my brother. And it's funny because my brother lived in Brazil so he was the last, if you like, among family members and close friends to come and visit, and Mike deteriorated very, very rapidly while my brother was with us for three or four nights, maybe. But he'd managed to come back to the house and have tea, because by this time he was in a hospice, and he managed to come home and have tea with Hugh in his house, so a, "Welcome to my house" sort of thing. Then in the early hours of the next day, he was taken ill and then he died the next day while my brother was still there. Yes, so that was the 10th October 1997. And so, from finding out, it was a year, or just under a year. I'm trying to think of the dates, it was under a year between finding those lumps and he died, so very, very quickly. We still don't know whether it was new primaries or secondaries, it was a very, very quick demise at

that time and we hadn't expected that at all.

I: You mentioned about he should have been downgraded and not sent to hot countries, was that ever something that was ever brought up or was that common knowledge?

R: [Pause] Mike didn't always tell me everything that was going on, because he loved the RAF life, loved shooting off here, there and everywhere, particularly if it was a Herc or something and he was going off, or a Viscount. He loved all that. Like I said, when we were both called to go on Desert Storm, he was chomping at the bit to go and so he went. So that's what he wanted. In terms of the downgrading.... We had talked about it then and he said, "I'll be fine, I'll be really careful, and I'll put sunscreen on and stuff". Whether he did or not, I don't know. I don't know. When Mike died, his boss – Air Vice-Marshall Moran – wrote to me. He came up when Mike was in hospital, he wrote and phoned me and said, "Look, you need to fight this. You need to fight the case for him, for getting an attributable RAF pension. Speak to the RBL to do this". I said, "I can't do that". I didn't have the fight in me to do that because I had three kids; Mark was 4 and a half, Dominic and Steven were hard work, difficult. When I say Steven was difficult, he had learning difficulties at school, particularly with maths and numbers, number problems. In Primary 1, they asked me if I could pick him up every lunchtime because they couldn't control him in the playground. But I was handling all that stuff and gradually, things would, you know, go up and down, up and down, in terms of his behaviour. I couldn't have fought that; I just couldn't have done it. But I don't know now exactly what he was wanting me to fight for, and I didn't get an attributable pension, I did get a war widow's pension. Now I understand that was because Mike's death was within a year of his leaving the service. But some years later, somebody else had gone through it and said, "Well, if you've got a war widow's pension on those terms then the other pension..." So somebody else had fought that fight and I thank them forever for doing that, and so I got that backdated, you know, lots of money backdated in terms of the support for the children, support for me, so that allowed me to pay off a huge chunk off the mortgage and things. But I couldn't have fought that fight, so whether there was anything else, I don't know.

This is hard because as you know, I'm one of the 300 people who fall into the category of having lost the pension by remarrying. So my husband, Mike, died in 1997 and I met my current husband, Marcos, about seven years later we only got married in 2013, because I didn't feel that I was in a place where I could quite give up on my independence, where I'd had to fight just to keep my head above water. So eventually we did get married and then, of course, a year later, David Cameron said, "Oh, it's all going to be fine. You can keep your war widow's pension". I thought, "Wow, that's really good", then found out, of course, that it wasn't backdated, and I was one of these people who were left in this gap. So, I'm very supportive of having that corrected, and I know that The Daily Express are fighting that cause and the War Widows' Association and their chairman, Mary Moreland, are really pushing that very hard with successive governments and Prime Ministers. But I do feel that that is a right, is a wrong that should be righted, not necessarily because of the money or anything, it's wrong that 300 of us should have been left like that – very wrong. And so, I'm hoping that might be corrected at some point soon. But yes, in terms of whether I should have fought

that, I don't know. But I'm not a 'What if ... ?' sort of person, really.

I: That brings me onto the next question, really, about how much support you had from the military after you were bereaved?

R: I had letters from the RAF Widows' Association and I think I'm only an associate because my husband had left at the time when I was widowed and I was in receipt of an RAF pension, and as I say, subsequently, that was made into an attributable pension, so I've got that for lifetime. Again, the letters from the War Widows' Association, I think these things were letters ... I don't know, I think a couple of them might have been personal letters, handwritten, which always means more, doesn't it, than something typed? I did meet up with two RAF widows in Edinburgh, you know, after Mike died... When Mike died, I didn't know how the money was going to be and we'd just bought a house with a mortgage; I didn't have the support of life insurance or anything because we hadn't had a chance to put that in place because of circumstances. I had these three kids; I was working part-time in day surgery, and I'd realised that, to get anywhere in nursing, I needed to get a degree, so I had started studying part-time at night school. I'm driven. My mum came up to live with me temporarily at first and she ended up staying with me long-term, and she's still here. But you can only do what you can do ... I've lost my trail of thought now. [Laughter]. Sorry. [Laughter]. It doesn't matter.

I: So, did you have anyone that could ... ?

R: Oh, yes. Sorry. I didn't have anybody. So yes, the associations were the only people. So yes, so I went for this lunch, and it was kind of 'ladies who lunch' and they'd been widowed some years and were kind of relaxed in each other's company and very calm. I could have been at another time a 'lady who lunches' and things, it's not really my thing, and they were lovely people, very supportive and willing to listen and had had similar experiences, I just didn't have the time or space for that in my life. I also went to a war widows' lunch, I think it might have been a QA Association lunch, I can't even remember, in Glasgow. Again, I felt as if I was a fish out of water. I didn't feel I could be part of it; it just didn't feel right for me. So I've never really been in touch until more recently, I went to the Founder's Day service, because it was in Liverpool and my daughter lives in Liverpool, and I thought, "I could go to that service, go to the dinner and then go to stay with my daughter" and that's what I did, and I'm so glad I did, so glad. It was really good, and now I want to be more involved with the War Widows' Association and possibly the RAF Widows in due course. I didn't have... I don't recall any contact from any liaison person at all. Because of course, at that time, Mike had left. In terms of the people in the NHS, they were very good to him again, he'd only been there for a couple of months. There was one friend of his, workwise, who used to come and see me at Christmas every year and he'd pop in and chat. I saw some people through work, through my work, and actually that was quite a solace, knowing people who had known Mike. Not that I was looking for the sympathy vote, just people who might have some understanding, having met him. So yes, then nobody else, and as I said, they were more or less saying, "Push", I couldn't.

I: It must have been difficult as well because you'd moved across a vast distance.

What was your social circle like at that time in terms of support?

R: So, we moved up, we'd been down south for five years – one house in Gosport and four years in Hillhead, and we came up here, we moved in the February and he died in the October. But we had friends at church, so we started going to the same church again. So, there was support from the people at church to an extent. My mother had moved up with me, my brothers did what they could. Hugh lived in Brazil so he was limited to what he could do, and my other brother, Richard, you know, I used to see him as well – he'd come up if he could or he'd invite us down, he lives in Portsmouth so, again, not easy. Mike's family were not helpful. [Pause].

I: So, in terms of how you were set up financially, you said you didn't have life insurance, you'd been advised on a personal level by someone who was senior to your husband about things that you could be entitled to, that was pretty much as far as it went?

R: Oh yeah. It was finding my own way through it. The financial advisor from the BMA was helpful, so she had liaised.... she was the only person I could go to and she had found some contacts,, of course, she was one of these financial advisors who was also wanting to take out policies so there was a little bit of that. Then she had a recurrence of breast cancer and that all got... so she kind of came and went from the scene, so no, I didn't have anybody, really, who helped me dig through this thing, I just had to find my own way, really, and that was it. There was nobody. I wouldn't have known who to contact in the Forces, bearing in mind that Mike was actually working actively at Haslar until the Easter that year, and obviously then he was on terminal leave and things, so, you know, there was a few months overlap; he'd already started to work for the NHS whilst he was on his terminal leave. But yes, so although we moved in the February, he didn't come up, and he came up that weekend, he then went back after a weekend and went back to work for the RAF and he only came up at Eastertime – that's when he finished working for them, physically. So, it was only a few months, and you're out the door and gone.

I: Can I ask you a little bit about how the grief manifested itself, if you don't mind?

R: No.

I: How you had to cope, especially because you were a working mother? How did you manage?

R: I think ... I'd done quite a lot of work when I was down south, I'd been working, before we came up this time, for the Citizen's Advice Bureau so I was used to advice services and things like that and interviewing people and things like that in different formats. I also had a nursing background, so I had a little knowledge of grief and I'd also done some introduction to counselling skills courses and things, so I understood the grief process. I had worked with SSAFA and, in fact, at the time of Mike's death, I was the Chair of SSAFA's central office Marriage Support working party, or working group – whatever it was called – it was a group that brought together the heads of social service functions of each of the three services – the services were bigger then, of course –

along with naval family services and army family services and things, together with Samaritans, Relate, Families Need Fathers and various other charitable organisations. They all came together in this committee to look at initiatives that might support servicemen and women and their families. So with things like separation, working abroad, so looking at providing things like Samaritans and Relate services for people stationed in Germany or Cyprus or wherever, and this was at a time when more people were actually posted to BAOR, whereas now it tends to be more short-term, you know, sort of family based at home and things. The pattern has changed a lot since then, so in fact, during my chairmanship, the first forces helpline, the bullying helpline, that was actually established under my chairmanship. I didn't physically do it, I chaired the group that officially led it.

So yeah, I had quite a lot of theoretical knowledge. It's very surreal when these things happen. I think the surreal sense of where you are is weird. So, Mike had died in the early hours of the morning, just after midnight, so that morning I got up and I didn't want the kids to go to school that day. My mum was with me, my brother was with me too, he had to go that day because he had flights booked to go back to Brazil and he just couldn't hold on as he had to go back to my sister-in-law. So, my brother came with me to the hospice to pick up his stuff and with me to register the death, then I took him to the airport in the car. I drove him there. Then I had a house with no food in, so I went to the supermarket and I found myself pushing a trolley around a supermarket. So, there I was, going through all that, I hadn't really slept at all, and you're bumping into people and being stropky with the trollies, holding the trolley, you know, and you think, "My husband's just died ...". And it's so surreal, really surreal. It just doesn't seem real. Then you're planning for a funeral and it just doesn't seem real. The funeral, obviously ... I had to phone the girls and stuff and organise it all so the girls ... And of course, the girls came up and they didn't have the support of their mum – their mum didn't come. The girls were staying with me, so I had the five kids, so I kind of organised it. So, I walked out with the coffin, and it was our church, Mark and I walked out first then Melissa, his younger daughter, then the elder son – so we walked out in pairs after the coffin before everyone else. I chose the music and the hymns. I got Pete, the guy I told you about, the Anglican priest, I asked him if he could do the eulogy type thing rather than our priest because he knew Mike a lot better, he'd known him for years and he was a friend. So, he had come up and we had friends of ours putting people up. [Laughter]. It was bizarre, completely bizarre. Bizarre. After the funeral was over and people went home, my mum was still here and mum and I had had a conversation – my dad had died a few years before – and we hummed and awed about what to do, whether it was best of her to come up and sell her flat; she'd moved out of the family home after Dad died. Anyway, in the end, we said, "Let's try it on a trial for a year, and after a year come back and say whether it's going to be the right thing", before she put her house on the market. So, we decided to do that, so we had this year, which was a compromise. So at least that was some stability in terms of someone else being there for childcare and things ... trying to manage the kids and things. I don't know, really. It's just a blur.

I: Can I ask you how you communicated what was happening to the children?

R: Oh, I told them everything. That's the hard thing because I'm not one for, you know ... I said, "Daddy's very sick and he's going to die. It's not your fault. He's not going to be with us, he still loves us". So, I used those sorts of words. I mean I can't remember exactly. But the awful thing is, with Dominic and Steven being adopted, Dominic – bless him, for all his learning difficulties – the first thing Dominic said: "Does that mean Steven and I have got to go back to Betty's then?" Even when Steven got taken back into care, he said, "Does that mean I've got to go now as well?"

I: What was "Betty's"?

R: His foster mother before. They were with a foster mother for two years before. So, there were all those uncertainties, and fortunately, he was able to vocalise that – thank goodness. Because otherwise, he would have had those doubts inside of him and I wouldn't have been able to reassure him. So, there was all that, and I was trying to support these girls from a distance, you know, and my relationship with the girls, Charlotte and Melissa, just got stronger and stronger and has done over the years. As I said, when you arrived, Melissa had just literally gone. We all went out for coffee this morning to the soft play, and she's headed down the motorway and I came to pick you up at the station, so we're really close. I was out to see Charlotte in Turkey because I could only see her for those few days and we just had some time together and it was just brilliant to get together with her and the children. So, you know, I love them. They're mine, you know. [Laughter]. And I'm theirs. I don't know, you just plod on.

I: So, in terms of your work, you were working part-time?

R: Nursing.

I: Did you go back to work or did you take a break? What happened with your career?

R: I was actually working on the bank, so I was able to take some time out, I didn't take much out because it was actually doing me good to go to work, to be away. It was just good to have some time to do something else. I'd just started at university. I was just doing one module at that time, maybe two modules, so that was two evenings a week. So, I had a week off that then I went back. That was stressful, just because trying to find my way through there, people weren't sympathetic at all – *at all*. It was just like you were paying your money to sit on a seat and you were a chunk of meat. I think that's all they cared about, the money. But anyway, it doesn't matter because I got through it and I got my degree. In the meantime, I got a permanent job a grade up, and then I got the Acting Charge Nurse and then Charge Nurse's job within three years of getting back into nursing. Because I'd had a few years out of nursing, because I'd been an officer in the army and a theatre sister in day surgery. So, I managed to do that and then from there, I applied to the Royal College of Nursing, and then I was working there in the education department, working as, my job title was Professional Support Facilitator. That was in Edinburgh, so I was working there for three years, and that was full-time. I was full-time by this time. Then I was ready to work for a move after having been there for three years so I then ended up working as Head of Workforce Development, which was quite a new and developing area in the NHS, so I was Head

of Workforce Development for NHS Lanarkshire for three or four years. Then I was invited to apply for a job in NHS Ayrshire and Arran as... well the job title was Assistant Director Service Futures. Basically, my responsibility was about service change, service improvement and lean methodology and that kind of thing, that's basically what I was responsible for in NHS Ayrshire and Arran. I had been there for four years, then I was invited to go and work on secondment with the Scottish Government doing workforce... there was a new Act, well, a new Bill, it was, at the time, which was about integration of health and social care and how that would work and I was asked to go help out with that, which is what I did for the last two years before I left. So that's quite an interesting career.

I: Did you say you've recently undertaken a Master's?

R: No, just a first degree again. I had got my degree, because I did nursing, so I did the extra modules needed to give me my degree – a BSc in Health Studies, and I graduated when I was just 41. Then I did start a Master's, of which I did a couple of modules, it was just time and jobs and things, and it didn't work out, so I didn't go any further. But I did do a postgrad certificate in Strategic Workforce Planning while I was working for NHS Lanarkshire, and that was down at Thames Valley University, done mainly at a hotel just outside of Manchester. [Laughter]. So that was quite good, I enjoyed that. But yes, unfortunately, when I was working for the Scottish Government, I became unwell and I went off sick and couldn't go back to work. I had started to suffer from arthritis, suddenly and quite badly, and had an awful lot of pain. I couldn't pin it down for quite a long time in the end, I just wasn't able to go back to work, so I had to quit my job. So, for a while I couldn't really do an awful lot. I did do some voluntary work; I helped set up a food bank in Larkhall and also helped with setting up another project, sort of a community hub in the town. So, I was involved in stuff like that and stuff through church and things and fundraisers and stuff wasn't able to go to work. More recently, I've been feeling better, well, I *have* been better and my health's improved again, so I've decided to go back and do what I wanted to do, which was go to university to do what I wanted to do and not just something to further my career, which is really what I'd always done before. So, I'm doing Classics and Theology, which is what I would have done when I left school. That's what I wanted to do, Classics and Theology, maybe with a bit of philosophy and maybe with a bit of maths, those were the two and that's what I'm doing now. So, there you go.

I: So, what's your particular interest?

R: I'm really interested in the historical picture of what life was like at the turn of the millennium, you know, the BC/AD bit. So I've always been taught that Jesus was a radical and he came in and had these ideas that everybody was shocked by, so I've accepted that and I don't like accepting things without understanding why so I want to understand more about what that world was like that he came into. Was it really like we've been told, or have we not really been told very much at all? So, what was it like? Where was he speaking? These things he was saying to the people, what did they mean to the people then instead of the people that are now? So, I'm really interested in that. I just love all that. I've always loved history. I've always loved ruins and things. I'm also interested in monks and things like that. It's all a bit creepy and a bit weird.

[Laughter]. I did a module on Mediaeval History last year, which I thoroughly enjoyed; it was absolutely brilliant, all about the Crusades and popes killing each other and... [Laughter]. Tremendous, I loved it. Obviously, there's some biblical studies in that it's all the historical stuff really, and also, the information about how the bible was written, who it was written by, who it was written for, how were the books of the bible chosen and by whom, and what criteria was being used, so the developed of the canon, which is another thing I was looking at last semester and I want to go back to that and look into that more. I've always had a bible and picked it up, it came from somewhere, not nowhere and it's been the same for about 500 years, more or less, before that it was very changeable, certainly in the first few hundred years after Jesus died, it was a very mixed bag of different documents. There are still a lot of those other documents around and they're still available, they're not in the bible so most people have never heard of them. I just think that's fascinating, all this ancient stuff. I love ancient stuff. There's a lot more ancient stuff than that as well that I'd like to get into, that's a really good start. I've only got ... I'm 59 so I'm limited to what I can do. [Laughter].

I: A PhD in your 80s. [Laughter].

R: I did think about doing a PhD before, I think I'm concerned that a PhD is usually focusing down on something very, very tight in terms of your hypotheses and I just want to keep my studies very, very, very broad. So last year, for example, I got a decent grade and I'm quite happy with that, I know I study too broadly because I get interested and I go down tangents. I don't mind because I'm not studying with any aim other than to enjoy the love of learning, because it's awesome. So, I don't have to think about getting brilliant grades, and, you know, it's an Honours course I'm doing, to what level I'll do, I don't know, I'm just loving it. But that's why I'm doing joint honours because it gives me more breadth of choice in my third and fourth years in terms of what studies I'm doing, and also my dissertation. There's a lot of crossover in those things, so it's really good.

I: Can I ask you about your faith as well, how that carried you through the loss of your husband?

R: Yes. I've been very fortunate to marry two men who had faith and I was brought up, as you've gathered, in a Christian family. My mum was a Baptist through and through and my dad has been brought up an Anglican he, latterly, Mum and Dad were both Baptists. I grew up with faith being just a part of life and I obviously, like everybody, have doubts sometimes, I'm one of these people who looks at plants and animals and things and I just... When you look at the world around you and think this is just some accident that's just happened, I can't believe that. When you look at God's creatures, and the creatures in the depth of the sea, and sea anemones and jellyfish and lions and tigers, and beautiful flowers. In the summer, you look at flowers and think, "Look at the detail on that". If you look at that through a microscope, it's just awesome. It is just incredible, and I just can't believe that all these things are just accidents. So that's kind of the basis of it. I do believe in that Jesus Christ is Lord, and so on. I don't want to go into too much detail about my Christian beliefs I have an absolute belief in God and believe that there's something about people of faith that is in common, I think people of faith understand each other and I've had conversations with other people of faith that

although I'm definitely a Christian, I see there's a common link, which is a strength, I think.

I: Can I ask you, if it's not too personal, whether you think it was part of a plan that you lost Mike, or did it make you question anything? You don't have to answer that if you don't want to.

R: I think.....There's thing about refiner's fire in the bible, you know, so there's this thing that you're put into the fires and that makes you a better Christian and, you know, thinking of coal and diamonds, it's only through time and pressure and hardship that a lump of coal becomes a diamond. I know that's oversimplifying I think that everything that happens to us changes us and we can use that for good or for ill. I feel fortunate to have had Mike as my husband and he has given me my children, because all five of them, and my girls... they're his girls, not mine, they're still mine through his gifting, because without him they wouldn't be there so he's left such a huge legacy to our family. We talk about him now, you know, we were playing backgammon, bizarrely, and Mike used to play backgammon all the time and Marcos loves backgammon, so we were playing it last night. You know, the best of three and winner takes the place of the other one and that kind of thing, so these things continue.

So, what do I think about him? I think he lived 90 seconds in every minute. He was very active, very lively, full of energy, and he just put everything into everything, just so energetic. He used to wear me out. Maybe you only have so many heartbeats and that was what he had; I don't understand that. I think there's a lot of strange things... I mean, my faith, I do believe in heaven; I do believe he's gone... I don't know what heaven is, I think he's gone to a better place and he's gone to be with God because he had faith, no doubt about that, no doubt. I've no reason to doubt that. I do see that I have had some difficult stuff to cope with in my life, here I am, I've coped with it. But I think, "What else can you do?" Curl up in a ball and...? I don't know, I'm not that kind of person. I'm a coper and I just do it. You don't have any choice; you just have to. I'll tell you what is weird, there's a lot of connections between Mike and Marcos. Let me go onto that, so is that okay to move onto Marcos?

I: Yes.

R: So yeah, it must have been about six or seven years after Mike died, and up here the schools have – there's a thing called a ceilidh, which is a Scottish dance and it's a very much collective, community type affair where everybody comes along from the smallest baby to the oldest grannies, and every dance is together and they're mostly formal dances – either circle dances or square dances and that sort of thing. Usually, there's a band with a caller who tells you what to do, so if you're not sure what to do, they say, "Okay, hold hands, round to the left, round to the right, so many steps", you know, so everybody can join in, even if you're not very sure. Well, they're quite popular in schools because everybody can do it; they can teach the kids the ceilidh dances and so on. So, this particular time, there was a ceilidh at Mark's school. So, Mark was in primary school, Lenzie Primary School, and Dominic had left, he'd gone to a special school after primary school. But he'd still gone through Lenzie Primary School, so he wanted to come with me. The girls fancied coming to a ceilidh and Charlotte just

happened to be over from America, and Melissa was studying, doing her degree in Glasgow at the time, so I got four tickets for the four kids. Well, I say 'kids, Charlotte was 24 or 25 at the time. We were going to go along then Melissa got a date [Laughter] which took priority so I had this spare ticket, so some friends of ours who lived down the road, their daughter, Jen, was about the same age as Melissa, so I said, "Look Jen, do you fancy coming?" So, she came along. So, I had these four kids. I had Charlotte, Jennifer, Dominic and Mark at this ceilidh. So, we went in, sat down at a table, and there was this guy at the next table with a girl and a boy, and I saw the little boy had got up to play, because the school orchestra played a couple of pieces first, and this boy played the trombone. Then he came in and sat down, and then the ceilidh bit started. He must have thought, "Okay, I've done that bit for the kids, I'm going to go" seemingly. Anyway, the ceilidh started, and it was the Gay Gordons, which is always the first one, and what they often do at the ceilidh, they play the same dance twice with two different pieces of music. So, you dance it once, there's a pause, then they start playing a different kind of music to the same beat. So, I got up with Dominic, danced the first one, then I was walking back to the table and this guy at the next table gave me the eye, raised his eyebrows as if to say, "Do you want to dance?" I thought, "Ooh, oo-er!" and that was him.

The weird thing, one of them – there were a number of weird things – the first weird thing, that day, I'd had a meeting – I was working for the Royal College of Nursing at the time – and I had had a meeting in Glasgow with the Scottish Nursing Guild in their office which at the time was in a managed office building, a Regus office building, one of those ones you go and sign in at the desk, and I had had to go and sign in and there was this guy on the desk where I had to go and sign in and it turned out that was him. So that was really freaky; I'd never been in that building before and that was really freaky that it was the same person, and that we happened to be in Lenzie, which is ten or eleven miles away at the primary school disco that night. The next one is that his sister worked with Mike at the Royal Infirmary in Glasgow, when Mike was working there and remembers him as a good guy.

The next one is that my best friends who lived up the road from me in Lenzie – the best friends of Mike and I's best friends, Anne and Zen– they knew Marcos because Marcos had worked with Zen in a building, when he worked for Yard in Glasgow. The other thing was Mike had a kind of sabbatical, a professional development thing when we were down south, when he came up to the Canniesburn Hospital, which at the time was a plastic surgery hospital, to do some facial plastic surgery, and he'd met this plastic surgeon called Wayne from South Africa and they became quite friendly during the time that Mike was there. Mike kept in touch with him after he left; in fact, I'd let Wayne know that Mike had died because he'd phone up to ask how he was and things as he'd heard that he was ill. Then I was talking to Marcos and Marcos used to go out running with this guy, Wayne. So, there were some really weird connections, and some unfortunately weird things about Marcos that the girls say: "He's just like Dad, it's so scary." [Laughter]. So, things like not being very good at computers and being obsessed about how you pair your socks and just little weird things, funny little things, strange. Strange. So, when you sort of talk about faith, I just think there are more things in heaven and earth, like we said before. Mike always used to wink, you know, Mike had this wink, and then Marcos had the raised eyebrows – giving me the eye.

[Laughter]. So, I think there's something there, I don't mean to say necessarily between them, you just wonder, don't you? But faith is always just... yes, I do have a faith. I pray and we go to church, so those things are important and a big part of my life and give me strength in the tough times. There's a poem that's called 'Footsteps' – you can Google it and it just talks about walking, seeing footsteps on the beach and this person is talking to Jesus and is saying, "Sometimes there are two sets of footprints walking along the beach and sometimes just one set". And this person says to Jesus, "Where were you when I was on my own?" and Jesus says, "I was carrying you". That, to me, is what my faith is like, so when I am in my darkest depths and my faith is my weakest, that is actually when God is carrying me. [Pause]. That's it. [Laughter].

I: Can I go onto talk about your relationship with Marcos then?

R: Yes.

I: You waited a while to get married?

R: Yes. So, we got together fairly soon after we met. When we met, Steven had moved out and was in care, he broke into the house a couple of times, into the garage, and so that probably led to Marcos being around more than he would have done because he was wanting to be supportive as things were just really difficult. But we were together, we had holidays separately. We'd got off with the kids and we never had joint money or anything, so we were kind of... I felt the need to keep some separation; I couldn't fully commit although I really cared. I can't explain the fact as to why I really cared still couldn't fully commit. I can't rationalise that very well, I just couldn't. But the thing was that we moved house, so my mum lives with me and she became more and more tied to the house in Lenzie because it was on a hill and, just quite simply, the house didn't lend itself to having a bedroom downstairs. Mum was finding it more difficult to get out of the house; she could only do that by getting a taxi or by getting a lift somewhere, and she had to climb up half a dozen quite steep steps at the side of the house to do that and she fell on them twice. So, we felt we needed to find a house that was on the flat, that had bathrooms and bedrooms on the ground floor, and that gave us access to some sort of facilities.

So when we moved here, we just looked for the house, we didn't look for a place; we needed to be able to commute, for me, to work, for Marcos to work, and for Mark, who was living at home still, to get to university. He was at uni at the time. So, we wanted to do that, to find those facilities and this was the house that ticked all the boxes. So, we moved to Larkhall, knowing nobody here, and it's been absolutely the best thing we ever did. Mum was very able when we moved here seven years ago to nip out and get on the bus to Hamilton or even go to Glasgow, walk to the hairdressers, walk to the library, walk to the shops. Now, she might get the bus one stop or two stops to get to the doctor's surgery or we might drop her off and she'll find her own way home – that kind of thing at 95 is not bad. So, it's given her a huge new lease of life and we kind of feel very well connected now in the town, though it's a Lanarkshire town and many people have been here million for generations, they're very warm and welcoming. So that's been really good. But moving to this house, I think moving away from the house that had been Mike's pride and joy for those few months, and that we'd

chosen together, I think allowed Marcos and me to move to the next step, so that's when we decided to get married and commit to that. It was me who was holding back, yes, that's what we did.

I: Can you tell me about your wedding day?

R: Well, we decided just after New Year, around 3rd January or something like that. We'd had these roundabout conversations and then he asked me, and I said yes, so we got married on 25th January. [Laughter]. Less than three weeks. I can't remember exactly what date he proposed it was less than three weeks – one day less than three weeks or something like that. We didn't tell anybody, and we just did it. Obviously, Mum and Mark knew because they were living with us, so just the two of them knew; we didn't tell anybody else. I did say to Dominic, "Don't be surprised if you might hear soon that we might be getting married as we're going to just go away and do it". We didn't go away and do it: we got married at our local church, so that was it. We just wanted it us and the minister. But unfortunately, the minister told everybody so quite a few people from church came. It was quite funny at work – it was on the Thursday and I said, "I won't be in tomorrow, I'm taking a bit of a long weekend. I'll see you on Tuesday", because I had a team meeting. And I said, "By the way, I'm getting married tomorrow". It was, "What...?!!" So that was kind of weird, and they were really sweet; some of them came across.

Yes, so we had intended it just to be the four of us and the minister. As far as preparations went, there weren't many. I got the local florist to organise my flowers, and I had a dress in the wardrobe which was a Thai silk dress which I'd had made years ago in Thailand and had never worn, so I wore that. I found some fabric in John Lewis, that was purple, so I had some purple fabric with turquoise and red – well, two shades of turquoise and red as well as this– so I'd made that into like a shawl-y sort of thing, and that's what I wore. So, we got married and then got a taxi up to a restaurant in Hamilton – 'Andiamo'; it's changed its name since then, an Italian. We booked a table and we had bubbly and martinis and a lovely meal and spent the afternoon there and that was it. [Laughter]. So, nothing much to tell. I don't like a lot of fuss. I really just don't like... It's my 60th next year and Marcos's is saying, "Oh, why don't you have a party?" "No". But he had a party for his 60th, you see, and he wants me to have a party, I don't want a party. I don't like fuss.

I: A nice meal out somewhere with some friends?

R: Oh, we'll do something, to me it's just having the family round and having a meal at home or all going out for a family meal. That's enough for me, the immediate family – that's all I want. I don't want... I mean we can go on holiday and call it a family...but I'm not a fuss person.

I: How did you broach the subject that you were widowed, with Marcos? Did it come up; did you explain the circumstances? How has he helped you to...?

R: I think I've been very fortunate. I mean, I think he'd accepted me as a "job lot". I mean, we had a conversation earlier about his first visit to my house when one of my dogs

chewed his shoe. He knew when we first met that there I was, with four kids. My mum, unfortunately, wasn't very well and she actually ended up in hospital a couple of days later, only for a day, she was quite poorly and had medication and things she needed. So, he knew from those very first conversations that that was the situation, and I'd explained I was widowed. So that was never... it wasn't a difficult thing to broach in that sense. I didn't make anything much of being a war widow, obviously there was a military connection. He'd been in the TA some years ago as well, so he had some sort of army, kind of, sense, a little bit about that.

I: Can I ask you about how you celebrated birthdays and anniversaries and things like that?

R: I always say to other people, when.... the first year you're holding your breath and preparing yourself and steeling yourself for these anniversaries, and actually most of them you get through okay. But it's the funny little things, like when you open the wardrobe and you find something that belongs to your husband or when you go somewhere and that's the shop you used to go to, or the café where you sat in the corner or... It's the little things that you don't expect that hit you more. The second year, you think it's all going to be better and it's worse. Because the first year, you're steeling yourself.

Another thing I didn't say, when we were talking about support from people, I actually got a letter. When we lived down in Wroughton, there were some neighbours who lived across the road, the guy's brother had died very suddenly in a car accident and his widow wrote to me when Mike died, quite a long letter, and I'd only met her a couple of times. I was obviously, you know, very surprised to hear from her. She said one of the things that happened when her husband died was that people said, "Oh, you should do this, you shouldn't do that, why don't you do this?" and people were quite emphatic about giving her advice and instruction on what she should or shouldn't do and she said, "You do what you want. If you want to sit in the corner and tear your hair out, do. If you want to go out to the cinema or go to a club and get pissed, do it. Don't listen to what other people say", or, "Listen to what other people say don't do what they want you to do; do what *you* want to do and then if it doesn't work out, you've only got yourself to blame. Don't have regrets that you did or didn't do certain things". That was the gist of it. But she wrote it much more articulately and beautifully than that.

That is advice that I have given to other people as well, because, actually, yes, there are days when you feel strong and other days when you don't, and that's okay. There are the days when you want to cry and the days when you don't want to, and times when you cry when you don't really want to, you don't really mean to. Tears come quite easily to me and that's really frustrating, particularly when you're angry, and I think that's one of the things that women suffer from. And I say 'suffer from' because I've found that in a work situation sometimes you get very emotional or frustrated and the tears come, and it looks like a weakness. I think it's one of those things we have to bear. But yes, I think that is the thing. I think that things like being widowed.... I think most people who have been widowed would feel the same, that people shut you off and particularly as a woman. I think a male widower, people would rally round and would have an extra man at the dinner table or something, an extra woman is seen as

a threat. So, I had friends – who I thought were friends – who suddenly didn't invite me anymore and that was quite a theme. I've talked about that with other people and that's kind of a theme that they recognise, and I don't think men experience it in the same way at all, so that's kind of a gender thing. But, yes, so the biggest day really... we remember all the anniversaries and I particularly remember my wedding anniversary. Nobody else does I don't mind because it's *our* anniversary, you know. Mike's birthday comes and goes, really. The big one is 10th October that we remember – the day that he died. Quite often, you know.... On his birthday and on that day, 10th October, we usually text each other, these days it's WhatsApp, and we send messages. It might be specific, or it might be just, you know, just little words, we are all aware of that; we all remember those days. I remember on the 10th anniversary, I took Charlotte, no, Charlotte wasn't around, Melissa and Dominic, and Mark and I went out for a meal, because Charlotte was in America and Steven had gone by that time.

So, things like that, we've done stuff like that so that's good. He's just so present with us, and Marcos has been so good as accepting Mike as part of our life; he's never been resentful about our conversations. I'm very, very fortunate that that is the case – he's not at all jealous in that way, as it's the past now. And he's been married before, so he's got his own past that he deals with too; he's got two children from his marriage and they are part of our lives as well. They've never quite connected in the way the others have they are very welcome, and they are included. But maybe that will come in the years to come, who knows? Yes, it's usually on the 10th, it's funny how things often happen on particular days. Mark is having a.... is rescuing a greyhound; the dog has been in kennels and they weren't very good kennels and they'd been brought into the Retired Greyhound Trust – it's now called just the Greyhound Trust – they'd come from there. They've taken on a number of dogs from those kennels that had been closed down. So he's not had the easiest of lives: first, he's a greyhound and, second, not a very good experience as a greyhound, and not housetrained or anything yet so Mark thought that was a bit much to cope with, particularly as at the moment, because of where he is with his PhD, a science one, and he can't take time off until into October. Anyway, we had a home visit about this dog and whilst the home visit was happening, I was told that the dog was going to go into foster care for a few weeks and that has to end on 10th October because the family who were fostering are going on holiday so we thought, "Ah, 10th October, a new one into the family", so we thought that was kind of a bit special. Then he thought it was going to be the end of October for his transition to the next year then he got an email whilst he was out walking this dog round near his house to say that, actually, the transition would take place on 8th October, which would allow him to take leave after 10th October.

So, you know, things have a way of happening. There's little signs you get sometimes. Similarly, my brother died, the one living in Brazil, he died nearly three years ago. The day he died, my grandson, the one that's just gone away today – Samuel – he was born on the same day, within hours of each other. Hugh died and Sam was born. So, there are things that happen that are beyond... I'm not trying to make some psychic or religious point, I don't think all coincidences are real coincidences. I think sometimes they have a meaning. There are lots of things in my life that have, you know, like with the stories about Marcos. I could tell you some stories about dogs as well another time.

I: Tell us about Remembrance Day, is that significant for you?

R: Oh! Yes, it's dreadful. Dreadful. Wonderful dreadful. It's very emotional, I can feel the emotions coming. Yes, it always has been from day one. Most military things, really. It's funny, with the war widows thing. Am I a war widow? Because, you know, I'm not getting the pension anymore so when I stopped getting the pension, I thought "Oh, so I'm not a war widow anymore. Am I really a war widow because Mike died of melanoma?" So, it's these conundrums, and I think I'm only an associate of the RAF Widow's Association because my husband died a few months after he left, because financially it was better for me because they knew he was dying. So, you know, so it's kind of I feel it gives you a sense of uncertainty in terms of how you feel. I don't know, it's a bit weird. But Remembrance Day, particularly, is very emotional. I can't... I can't watch the Albert Hall thing. I just can't do it. I just want to cry all the way through it. It just becomes too much. I normally go to church and again, it's funny because often you go to church and you always look for a man to take up the wreath and it's some guy that maybe did his national service. I think, "Well, I served for five years, I'm a war widow", you know. Not that I would ever vocalise that there, you know, it's strange.

Last year, Mark and I, because it was – was it the 50th anniversary or something, or the 100th? Some special anniversary, wasn't it? So, Mark and I went to the local war memorial where there was a service at 6 o'clock in the morning, and that was really quite beautiful. There must have been a couple of hundred people. It was in front of people's houses, so it was very, very quiet. They had a gentle PA system so we could hear what people were saying, and they just did readings and a couple of little prayers and things. We were both very emotional. But yes, I find Remembrance Day is very difficult. One of my favourite pictures, which is very faded and sad now, is of our first year that we were married, with both of us with our uniforms on. For me, it was my number twos uniform, which is your suit and your hat, and with our poppies in, all set to go to the Remembrance service at church in Wroughton village. So, you know, it was something he and I both felt strongly about in life and that's continued – it's very emotional.

It was very emotional when I saw the soldiers coming in from Iraq and Afghanistan, when you saw them being flown in, and when they went through Wootton Bassett, for example, that was... I remember Wootton Bassett from having lived down in that area. Yes, all those things, and it just hits hard home and you think of all the people affected. You go on Twitter now and you look at some of the things that happened there and people's stories and people who are affected. You know, these things are real, and they do happen, and my husband wasn't shot down in a plane... My friend was, a friend of mine – Agnes Austin – and she was an RAF theatre sister, she and I worked together at Wroughton. She had a very dry sense of humour; we were really good friends. We went... well we invited each other to each other's weddings; it was the same year, the same summer. Unfortunately, she couldn't get to mine because another friend of ours was getting married on the same day and it was just kind of unfortunate, Mike and I went to her wedding. That was the year after... It was 1987 and there were huge winds and a lot of trees got knocked down, and unfortunately, the wedding reception had a power blackout because of the trees going down. But it was wonderful because they had some old gas ovens that they managed to resurrect to cook the meal

and the place had candelabras full of candles and it was the most magical wedding. Of course, they were all in their uniforms.

Anyway, so John was in the Air Force and he was a helicopter pilot, and he, some years after – I can't tell you what year it is, I could Google it for you – he was shot down in a helicopter and killed, he was the most senior officer to be killed at that point in time over Iraq. Then, sadly, Agnes was killed... died – they didn't have children, and obviously I'd spoken to Agnes after that and we kept in close contact – then a couple of years later, she became ill very suddenly and died within a couple of months. So, you know, these things, when I think of John and Agnes's story, and now even Agnes has gone... That was quite emotional because when I went down to the Founder's Day service in Liverpool, I was talking to an RAF widow and I think it was Jan, I can't be sure because they were all new faces to me. I think it was... Anyway, she knew Agnes, so I was talking to her about Agnes. There were quite a few tears that night, I have to say, just talking to people who had connections.

But I can cope with that now – yes, it might be emotional, I might cry, I can do it now. I somehow feel as if I'm at a stage in my life where I'm able to deal with it, so maybe in terms of that grief process, it's still there, to me, grief... They talk about the four stages of grief and blah-blah-blah, grief never goes away. People have tried to explain all sorts of things about losing someone, and this isn't being a war widow, it's just losing someone that you love, whether it be your spouse, thinking about my brother or thinking about my father, and if you've lost somebody you still love them. You don't stop because they die, so of course there are still emotions attached to that. It's normal. It wouldn't be normal to wipe them out and say, "Oh well, yes, I was going through a grief process and it's over now. Now I'm fine". That's barmy. That, to me, would almost be completely diminishing any relationship or care or love you had for that person. So, to me, it will be until the end of my life. It doesn't stop me living my life and loving my life and being thankful for everything I have in my life.

I: I'm going to go back and ask you... we talked about you meeting Marcos and getting married, and one of the caveats with this was that you lost your war widows' pension.

R: Mmmh.

I: Did you have any idea that you would lose it beforehand? Did you have to notify them when you started to cohabit or anything? What was the process there?

R: Yes, I did, I had to tell them. So, we had been, if you like to say, cohabiting for some time before that, I was clear in my mind that there was a defining line in terms of our relationship that I didn't feel we were living together as man and wife. I really didn't. I mean, he wasn't very close to Mark, and we had very separate lives, completely separate money, completely separate in many, many ways. But when he moved here, things did change and we planned to get married so at that point, I wrote to them and said it had been since moving here that things had changed, which it did. That was the truth. But you have to write to them, and there's a while rigmarole of letters forwards and backwards, and I made the point that that's how it was, that it was only as a result

of moving here. But that, then, you know, that kind of undermines me and I felt guilty and should I...? You know, at the same time I still felt very rational about the fact that, the other part of that is about Marcos's personal circumstances, because he didn't have a great income when he was working, so significantly less than mine, so I couldn't feel that I could... it's not that I didn't want to share, I feel that a lot of the things that I have are as a result of my earnings, not that I mind sharing that, also Mike's legacy, and so there was something about the risk of that being swallowed up into something different. I find it hard to kind of put that into words, because without sounding very selfish, and maybe I was very selfish, I couldn't let go.

After Mike died, I realised that I had given up my career for him; I had been a theatre sister, I had been a captain, I would have liked to carry on had to give up. Yes, I did charity work and voluntary work because I couldn't sit down, I just couldn't – I'm not a sitting down and doing nothing person. So, I did lots of stuff, worked for the CAB. But even working for the CAB and things, it was still, "well, why are you there?" as he liked me to be at home, and that was fine, that was the life that I led. But then suddenly, he became ill and it was clear he was going to die, and I really had to pick up the pieces and get strong again. It takes such a long time, and then I was being undermined by Steven's behaviour and the needs of the other boys and trying to be there for the girls as well, trying to be everything to everybody, and my mother, coping with my mother living with me, my mother saying, "Oh, I think you need a new sofa". "No, I quite like the sofa". "No, I don't think it's very comfortable". "I think it's really comfortable, I love it. It's an Ercol one, yes, it's been recovered I like it the way it is". "But wouldn't you like a nice leather sofa? Let's go and look at nice leather sofas". So, you'd go out, spend money on a leather sofa that you don't really want, and you don't like. So, all those things going on and I felt that I was constantly fighting to breathe, for me, which is quite different from how life was.

Because here I am, I'm back studying and I'm very obsessed with the politics stuff at the moment; I'm incensed and concerned, and I've got grandchildren; I want them to grow up in a better country, not a worse country, and without talking about what those politics are, I'm using my brain. There was a long time when I wasn't really allowed to use my brain very much, so having that not being able to and trying to sort of climb out of that stuff and getting back into a career again to potentially sort of give that up or suborn by views, I couldn't do it. I couldn't do it. But when we came here, and suddenly by this time, Mark was at university, Dominic had moved out, and things began to feel different again, and I thought, "Yes, maybe this is the time" and so that was the time to move on. But yes, I also knew I would lose that amount, and it's not a huge amount when you're going to have that income gone and you know your husband hasn't got a great income anyway, so you're going to have to support him more, the man you might be marrying... do you know what I mean? So, bearing in mind, the money that was coming in was for Mike, to turn that away was almost like turning him away as well. There's a lot of... a lot of baloney there, really. [Laughter].

I: Some people talk about it's symbolic meaning rather than its actual financial meaning.

R: Yes, as I say, it's almost like turning my back on him in a way, turning my back on Mike, you know, something from Mike, that to give that up was almost like giving him up. I don't know. Yeah.

I: Some people think it says something about how the Government maybe feels about their relationship and...

R: It's very difficult. I think I've only really thought about my own circumstances and my own pension, and as I say, I will be forever thankful to whoever it was that went through the courts to enable me to now have an attributable lifelong RAF pension, which has made a difference because I didn't risk losing that when I married. But when you look at, for example, the Forces Pension Society and things, there are other people who are widowed that wasn't necessarily attributable to the services, and they haven't got their pensions for life. Because a lot of these experiences that I have in being widowed are the same experiences that other people have in being widowed, and who am I to say that mine are more or less or worse or better than anybody else's? And also, some of these things, some of the emotions that you feel and the experiences you have are the same as separating for a life partner, separating or divorcing, depending on your circumstances. So, I don't like to make judgments about things like that. But at the same time, if everyone else has got it, why not we 300? That, I feel wrongly about. I do definitely think it should be put right. But I've also... I've always felt that pride of connection to the services. As I say, I joined up at the age of 23 and I was adamant that that was what I wanted to do. I was really very proud of having joined the Armed Forces, of being an Officer in the Army, very proud to have married an Air Force officer, both of us medical, and that meant a lot to me, and the war widows' pension in a way is a kind of continuation of that and it is an acknowledgment of Mike's death, of his service. I think it might perhaps feel different if he had got shot down in a plane or something, I don't know. Yes, I hope that can be sorted, anyway.

I: I'll just ask you a few round-up questions before we end the interview.

R: Yes.

I: What would you want people to know about war widows that they don't necessarily know?

R: War widows can be every age – they're not all just old ladies, though I'm 59 now so I'm getting to that older age. [Laughter]. I mean, I was widowed at 37 so, you know, that's kind of young, I think, and I had three young kids. So I think the age profile of war widows is probably an interesting one for people, I think the fact that people are widowed, the causes of death are very varied and I think that is something that, not everybody has an immediate, sudden trauma that's not the cause of death in a lot of cases. I think war widows have the benefit of this thing that is, by nature of being a war widow and having that connection to the services, which connects people together. But having had that service life also can mean you've not had the opportunity to put down roots in the same way that other people have. Certainly, for me, I've moved all over the place, and, okay, it's only within the UK I've moved a lot, so the friends you have are usually good acquaintances rather than deep personal friends just because

you make really good friends very quickly then you move on, and you don't have the opportunity to make friends in the same way.

I think there are a lot of challenges as a result of that, and also with the kids – the children of these circumstances, I think it's slightly different as well because of the service connection and their mobility and the need to move around and how they feel about their situation. That's certainly something that's a very strong one in my kids, or our kids. Mark is very affected by his dad's death. They all are, Mark was 4 ½ when his dad died and he doesn't remember him, and that eats him up. It eats him up, and mentally he has problems coping with that and it's affected his whole life, and he's so proud of his dad and he is so much wanting to be connected to his dad in any way, in anything military, anything to do with the medals, anything to do with his dad's stuff. I'll try to divvy up all the possessions and bits and bobs that I can spare in terms of, you know, I can bear to part with. But I can't make those memories, and we've got the memories that are created by photographs and things, that's not memories for Mark. And, as I say, for all of us, that military connection is something that holds us together. Things like the Cenotaph, things like the Tattoo, all those sort of military things have a sense of depth of meaning, I think, for us, that non-military people wouldn't have and when you've lost somebody as a result of being part of that, or having been part of it yourself, it has a kind of pathos about it.

I: Is there anything you would like to cover that you haven't or that we haven't touched upon enough?

R: It might be worth saying that my current husband, Marcos, his son is in 3 SCOTS, so he's based up at Fort George and we're very proud of him. Before he joined up, he'd already had a tour in Afghanistan, another in Iraq and another on border patrol in Cyprus, so he is a career soldier now. I'm very proud of him and that kind of continues it now down the next generation as well. But then you know, you're worried, because I say to him, "Keep your head down". Because people get killed, you know, and he knows that because he's served out there. But I think there's always that sense of, "It's not going to happen to me" it does. I think that's one of the things, I think having served in the army myself, and having known a lot of people personally, who have been injured and who have been close to certain situations and experienced certain situations and talked to them first-hand, it makes it a lot more real. I think in a way that makes it easier – both easier and harder as a war widow. Easier because you can understand that, yes, it happens because it happened, at the same time, the other side of it, it's harder because... I don't know... I don't know, it's just different, I think. There's a deeper, lots of multi-layered experiential things, yes.

But yes, war widowhood. I think being a war widow helps you, I think in terms of having the military connection has been a nice one for the family to connect to, perhaps that's been a good thing to connect us together over perhaps Mike having died in other circumstances. I think there's something, there's a strength in the military connection. I'm very glad that there are organisations out there supporting widows – forces widows and war widows. As I say, I just feel as though I reached a stage in my life where I can now contribute, and that's why I'm contributing now, because if we don't, then who will? I could not have done this years ago, and here I am, 22 years, nearly 23 years

after my husband died; I'm married again and it's almost like a lifetime ago, for me, now, I feel it's my time to give back in this way, in a way I couldn't then. Maybe it's more poignant if you can do that as some people are able to do soon after they're bereaved, I also, I'm concerned when I see some of the things that they're talking about because I think maybe they're just too raw and maybe it's just a bit too much and they need to have a bit of time to be before sharing that stuff because of what people might throw at them.

I: Shall we end it there?

R: Yes. Please. [Laughter].

[End of Recording]