

The War Widows' Quilt

Edited by Lois Blackburn,
Philip Davenport, and Nadine Muller

A War Widows' Stories Project

In partnership with the War Widows' Association of Great Britain

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Lead Artist: Lois Blackburn

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The War Widows' Quilt

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Contents

- 07 **Foreword** Mary Moreland
- 11 **Introduction** Nadine Muller
- 15 **Creating the Quilt** Lois Blackburn
- 19 **Conversations** Various
- 36 **Signatures** Lois Blackburn
- 47 **Pockets** Lois Blackburn & Philip Davenport
- 61 **Flowers** Lois Blackburn & Philip Davenport
- 69 **Poems** Philip Davenport
- 78 **Encounters** Lois Blackburn & Philip Davenport
- 81 **A Short History** Nadine Muller
- 83 **arthur+martha** Lois Blackburn & Philip Davenport
- 85 **Participants**
- 86 **Acknowledgments**



“Since the world began, men and women have held up the sky between them, but men have written the histories, and women have been, by and large, written out.”

Dame Hilary Mantel, 2018

Foreword

Mary Moreland, OBE
Chair (2017-21), War Widows' Association of Great Britain

This statement by Dame Hilary Mantel is rarely more true than in the case of war widows. Ever since I became involved with the War Widows' Association (WWA), as a member, as a trustee, and then as Chairman, I have been passionate about transforming the popular image of war widows as old and gloomy individuals. I have met, and still meet, amazing ladies with incredible personal stories, and one of my missions as Chairman of the WWA has been to capture these stories before they are lost forever. These remarkable women have not chosen this path for their life's journey. They did not aspire to be a war widow, but this is the journey they must now travel after their loved ones made the ultimate sacrifice.

Together with Dr Nadine Muller (Liverpool John Moores University) we officially launched the War Widows' Stories project on BBC Radio 4's Woman's Hour on 11th November 2016. Since then, our members and their families have told their stories in oral history interviews, learned how to be oral history interviewers themselves, shared their experiences in public events across Britain, and penned and stitched their memories in the form of poetry and art.

Like many members, I told my story, took part in the public events and contributed to the quilt project. For me, it was a very moving experience to see my passion turn into reality. However, telling my own story was awkward, difficult, interesting, and in some ways cathartic.. Thirty years on, the memories of that awful day are every



Wendy Hutchinson with a framed photograph of her husband, Tony. Tony left the British Army in 1992 with severe Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD). He died by suicide in 2015. You can find the poem "My Husband" by Wendy Hutchinson and Rita Armin on p. 76.

Photo: Ailbhe McDaid

Foreword

bit as fresh. It also made me much more aware of how challenging it would be for members to take part. I have spoken with many members who participated in the project. Each one has their own personal thoughts, but while all found it quite hard, it was also enjoyable, emotional, and in some ways energising. As one member summed it up: “It was the first time anyone had actually listened”.

Most of all, a massive thank you has to go to all the contributors of the stitched squares. Only with your stories and contributions was this quilt made possible. Personally, I love the top pockets that contain messages, photographs, and mementos.

The War Widows' Association is as relevant and as needed today as it was when it was first formed in 1971. It was established as a campaigning organisation to abolish the taxation of the war widow's pension. However, the Association has developed and in the twenty-first century is now built on three strong pillars: campaigning, caring, and remembering, each of which supports the organisation and its members to move forward together. It is the unique nature of service and family life in the armed forces that makes war widows special. Armed forces personnel must be prepared to respond to the calls of the government of the day and, where necessary, put their lives on the line. When the ultimate sacrifice is made, those left behind are often forgotten.

The Association provides a safe space nationally and regionally for war widows to come together. Here, they don't need to explain. They can just be. The Association accepts as full members anyone who meets the criteria of war widow/er, irrespective of the age, rank, or service of the deceased. The Association also has an associate membership for anyone who believes in our aims and objectives and would like to support us. Many of our associate members have strong links to the armed forces community and are often widows or widowers of serving personnel or veterans, daughters, sons, grandchildren of war widows, war widowers, or those who have served in the armed forces.

Behind every square there is a story of love, loss, and triumph. When you read our stories, look at our quilt, attend a remembrance service, behind every loss there is a war widow, son, daughter, mother, father, grandparent. Let us move on from women being written out of history. Let us move through the generations. And let us write our own history, as we have begun to do here.

Introduction

Nadine Muller

Liverpool John Moores University
Project Leader, War Widows' Stories

In 2016, Dr Ailbhe McDaid and I set out to begin recording the life stories of war widows in the form of oral history interviews during the pilot phase of the War Widows' Stories project. The stories we recorded in that first year were overwhelming, sobering, moving, and inspiring. But it came as no surprise to us that talking not only about oneself but also about deeply personal experiences of love, loss, and grief to a relative stranger is not for everyone. We knew we had to find another way, or rather more ways, to allow war widows to tell their stories on their terms and in their own words, to process their experiences, and to feel like their voices were being heard.

When Lois Blackburn and Philip Davenport (arthur+martha) introduced me to the stunning work they had been doing as part of the "Stitching the Wars" project, it quickly became clear that quilting and poetry would open up new avenues for War Widows' Stories. Poetry, so much shorter, more succinct, and more abstract than an oral history interview, can be written in private, alone, or in the company and with the help and encouragement of others. It can be explicit or subtle, and it can provide a way to express oneself without bearing all, without spelling out, while at the same also adding layers and layers of unspoken meaning. Stitching, too, has a powerful function in the context of this project.

The very act of making, of sewing, can have a calming, therapeutic effect that helps process experiences, trauma, and grief. Squares can contain text or images, hidden meanings, and, thanks to Lois's wonderful creativity, secret messages stashed away safely in the top pocket of a shirt.

NO WORDS COULD EVER
TELL THE COST OF OUR LOSS

I KNEW YOU AND YOUR LOVE

KIERON YOUR BABYSON

HAS NO MEMORY OF

YOU

BERNICE WILLIAMS © 2019

Introduction

Coming together in workshops to talk, write, stitch and make provided both a social occasion and peer support in what could be challenging memories to recall and painful emotions to process. Lois's individual home visits funded by Arts Council England, ensured that many who were able to leave their homes or travel far could participate, could add their story to the quilt, could commemorate themselves and their loved ones, and be heard, be listened to. Mail art, with instructions, inspiration, and materials provided by Lois and Phil via post, was an ingenious and invaluable aspect of the project for those who wanted to make a contribution in their own time, in private, remotely.

For many war widows, telling their stories had already been a challenge. Many found it easier to talk about their husbands and their children than about themselves. And that is in no small part because they so rarely are asked to. Lois and Phil have spent decades working with people from all walks of life. Connecting with others and helping them tell their stories is second nature to these wonderful artists. Watching them at work with "our women" has been a privilege and a pleasure, and the art you see in these pages reflects both the personal stories of the women with whom we have worked as well as revealing what talented, special people are behind the work of arthur+martha.

When I first met the members of the War Widows' Association in 2016 and many other war widows thereafter, no years of research could have prepared me for what was to become the enormous privilege of their company for many (ongoing) years. Their stories have made me cry on more occasions than I can count, but they have also reduced me to tears of laughter so

many times and taught me life lessons that I will always carry with me.

Behind each piece of art and each line of verse you encounter in this book lies a story of loss, grief, resilience, and survival, but also of love, of laughter, of hope, and of new beginnings. Together, they form part of a history that deserves to be written, to be told, and to be listened to.

The history of war remains incomplete until it includes the stories of those who are left behind in its wake. The War Widows' Quilt is an important piece in our attempt to break the deafening silence that has surrounded the lives of war's forgotten women for all too long.

MACHIN

HARVEY

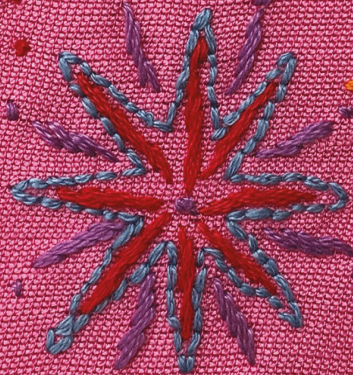
+

HILDA

1943

d 21/1/1945

d 22/4/2018



Susan Walker:
signature embroidery



FORCES.

空郵

PAR AVION POST
AIR MAIL OFFICE
CORREO AEREO

M
M
POSTAGE
2d
VICTORIA
1840

MRS E. BLACKBURN,
10 BALFOUR STREET,
ALLOA,
CLACKMANNANSHIRE,
SCOTLAND.

Creating the Quilt

Lois Blackburn

Lead Artist

50 military shirts were carefully taken apart to make the quilt patches. As I did so, the materials whispered to me. Some still smell of their last owner, are stained around the collar or cuff. Some have a name written in marker on a label or hem.

The War Widows' Quilt is a domestically-sized artwork with big ambitions: to communicate the untold stories of war widows across the United Kingdom.

My desire was to create an artwork that honours war widows' lives and struggles, celebrates their individuality, and is visually striking, telling these important stories to a wider audience in an impactful way.

I believed the quilt form would allow a deep, powerful, and meaningful collaboration between the participants and me. A quilt suggests comfort, warmth, and refuge, but it's also a poignant object for a widow: a reminder of the empty side of a bed.

I was tasked with finding ways to communicate complex stories from a diverse group of women, all with different levels of confidence in their sewing abilities and creativity.

As lead artist there were many creative choices to be made: What quilt form would we use? What fabrics? What sizes? What would be the connecting themes across the many pieces? For our collaboration, I needed to create a framework in which the women could feel confident and secure but that also allowed their individual voices to shine through.



Creating the Quilt

I chose fabrics that had been worn by the armed forces, speaking directly to the loss these women had all experienced. These are masculine, formal fabrics, suggesting authority. I carefully took apart fifty military shirts to make patches. As I did so, the materials whispered to me. Some still smelled of their last owner, were stained around the collar or cuff. Some had a name written in marker on a label or hem.

The structure of the shirt created possibilities: the shoulder epaulette, when removed from the shirt, becomes a decorative edge for the quilt.

The shirt pockets could hold secret messages, love letters. For size, I looked to my father's letters for inspiration. Written to his mum during his time in National Service, they reflect the importance of letter writing in times of separation. The larger rectangles in the quilt are based on standard blue Basildon Bond Airmail paper. The signature pieces are embroidered onto envelope-sized fabric.

I chose a patchwork technique that deliberately echoes the quilts made by British servicemen during the Crimean War (1853-56). The story is that the Crimea Quilts were made by military men convalescing in their hospital beds. But history is fuzzy around the edges. While each quilt is unique, they share similar motifs and geometric features, such as tumbling blocks that suggest collapsing buildings, or restful patterns, or children's building blocks, depending on your point of view.

Our next step was to meet the women and help and encourage them to express their experiences through text and textiles.

We consulted with them on the fabric choices, themes, colours, sizes. This was, after all, to be their quilt: the War Widows' Quilt.

During workshops, ideas for the embroidered words began to take shape, some of which came out of the poetry-making with Phil Davenport. But as we continued, the widows steered the writing and making more and more.

On my way to meet war widows across the UK, during train journeys or in B&Bs, I busied myself creating one-inch square blocks and diamonds, to be stitched into geometric patterns. Then, in happenstance, one of the participants at a workshop at The National Memorial Arboretum revealed she owned a Crimea Quilt, which inspired the central star design.

As the women worked on the quilt, they brought their own experiences, skills, fears, doubts, opinions, excitement, exuberance.

I've shed tears, laughed, and been inspired. I have learned much from the making of this quilt and the women who have so generously contributed so much to it. Sewing together the pieces into a final quilt felt a giant responsibility, but one for which I remain very grateful. I pass on a huge 'thank you' to all the women who have shown such trust and courage in taking part in this project for making me feel so welcome and allowing me for a brief time into their world.



Joan Eggmore

Conversations

Lois Blackburn

The women brought hope, joy and laughter to the work, but they also brought their grief.

"I found the whole exercise quite difficult. 19 years on from the event it is still painful. While stitching, I reflected on my childhood [...] The whole family sat round the table knitting, sewing, and doing craftwork. I was shocked at how much my sewing skills have declined, but glad I have done it and that it is to be part of a larger work by my friends."

Lorna Donaldson

"During the creation of my sample I was very critical of the 'imperfections', but on finishing it and considering the powerful impact of every stitch, I now feel proud for completing it."

Deanna Selby

Conversations

For some, the process was just too overwhelming, sometimes physically, because of disability or ill health, sometimes psychologically, because of emotional pain or trauma. In these cases, I had the privilege and responsibility to embroider on behalf of those who couldn't do so themselves.

"Sewing scrappy messages on a bit of cloth with the end result looking like a child's effort [...] It just highlighted the huge loss and huge impact [my husband] dying has had on my life [...] even almost 20 years on. I cannot draw, let alone sew. Would you be kind enough to do this?"

Anonymous

"I have done a lot of embroidery, but at 97 feel the results would not please me."

Joan Eggmore

"I just wanted to say thank you. I was blown away that you have done the stitching for me. I am delighted and quite overwhelmed being involved in such a wonderful project. A profound thank you. It's very important and I will do anything and everything that keeps Clark's name alive."

Theresa Davidson

"Thank you so much! You've done a great job and I'll be forever thankful. To know there will be a keepsake left behind in remembrance of what was for us 'the greatest and most intense love story ever.'"

Pauline Worden-Kelly

Conversations

What was evident in the experiences of many of the women was their (re)discovery of the sheer pleasure in using one's hands.

"I'm thrilled. I've re-started embroidery after the work I did for the War Widows' Quilt. It's been over 20 years since I last did any."

Susan Walker

"I found doing my first bit of needlework in years very relaxing."

Jenny Oates

"Knowing that I've done this, I've put something down. It's from the heart. One day you have everything, then the next day you've got nothing. What upsets me is that you feel like they've been forgotten. No-one knows how I felt. My mother did, but she's died now. [Making the embroideries and poems] did me good. I felt so much better. Somehow it helps to say something, to express it out loud. I must have needed to do it. This has helped me a great deal."

Angela Evans

"Thank you all, from the bottom of my heart. An amazing project, a piece of history for all, for the present and the future. A quilt of unending love, pain and grief. A quilt of great honour a true work of art."

Theresa Davidson

Conversations

Finally, some of the women felt there was a glimpse of peace both during and after the process of making their square...

"Sewing my square gave me a strange sort of peace. I could think about how [my husband] died while I stitched so the sewing was giving me a control. It's hard to explain, but it worked for me."

Lauran Hamilton



Deanna Selby with her square during a workshop at the National Memorial Arboretum in 2019.

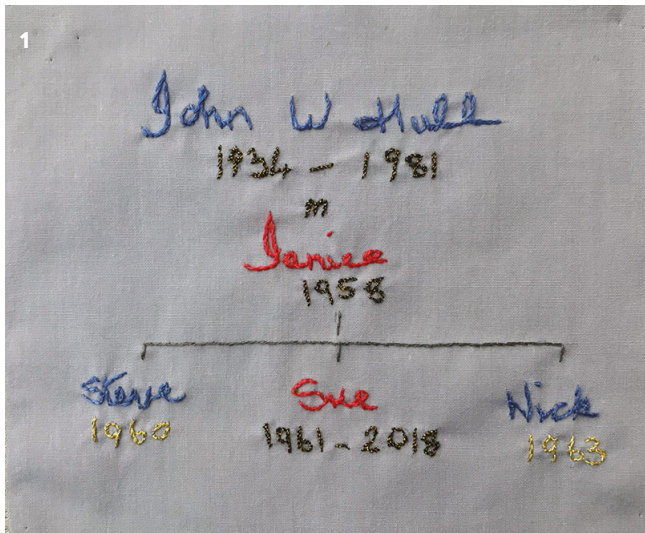
Signatures

Choose a fabric. Perhaps tartan means something to you? Or navy blue? If you are happy to, add your name, date of birth and the name of your late husband.

For the women who contributed to this quilt, stitching a significant date, with their late husband's name and their own, was full of complexities and emotions. For so many of the quilt makers, grief is ever close.

"I found it very emotive doing the stitching, to sew those dates, to acknowledge them so publicly. It was a stark reality, physically sewing. The years might pass, but the pain never goes away. You learn to live alongside grief. But I felt I had to get it done. This project is creating a nationally-recognised commemoration to him, a fitting tribute. It's been cathartic after all these years, an honour to do the embroidery."

Shirley Dodd Clark



1
Anonymous

2
Anonymous

3
Anonymous

4
Rita Armin
Henry died 1998 from injuries he sustained during the Second World War. "RE" stands for Royal Engineers (Parachute Regiment).

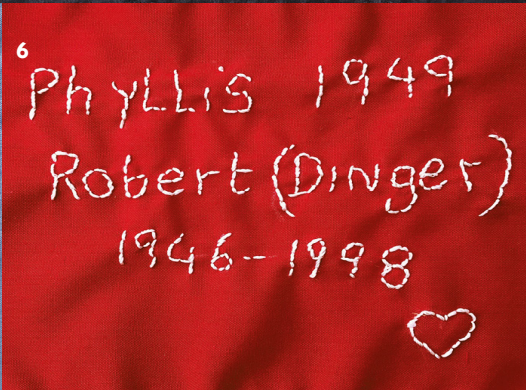
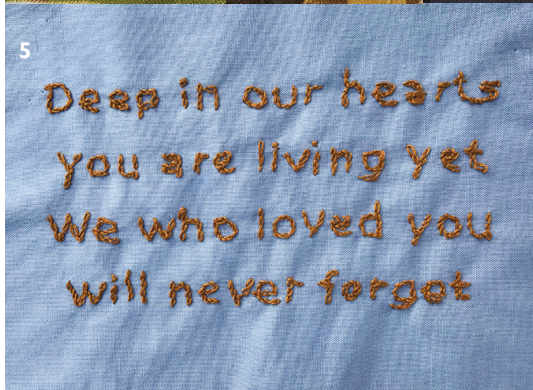
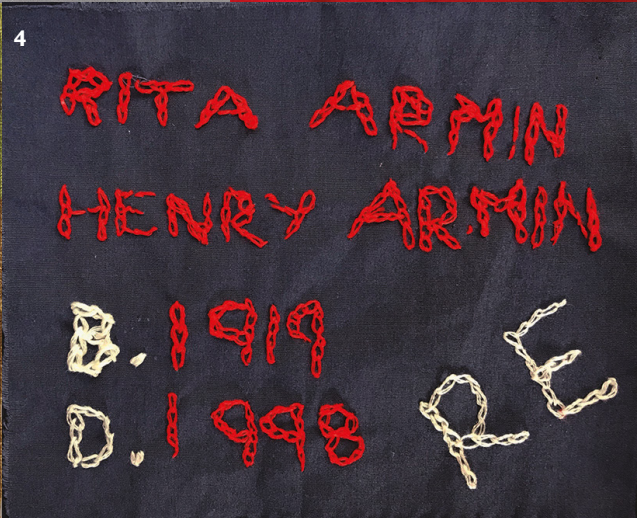
See poem 'My Husband's Name'

5
Bernice Bartlett
"The words sewn are those on my father Harry's gravestone at the Commonwealth War Cemetery, Gironne, near Florence, Italy."

Embroidered for Bernice Bartlett by her daughter-in-law, Pamela Golding.

See poem 'The Border'

6
Phyllis Bell



RAF G BAND
11th FEBRUARY 1985
SGT. MJX BOYD
29th APRIL 1947
to FEBRUARY 1985
"And the Band
plays on"

8
Pte Paul R Blakely
Murdered By Terrorists
31/05/91 Age 30
**2 UDR** 

7
Brenda Boyd

8
Denise Blakely

9
Kathleen Cahillane
"A swallow over his heart
With a scroll engraved with
My name when he was 18"

Kathy's haiku recalls her husband as a very young man. He had just had her name tattooed on his arm.

9
JAMES
FOREVER
YOUNG
AND IN MY HEART
KATHY

10
Harris Cairns
25-01-1988
**2 UDR**
Co. Armagh 

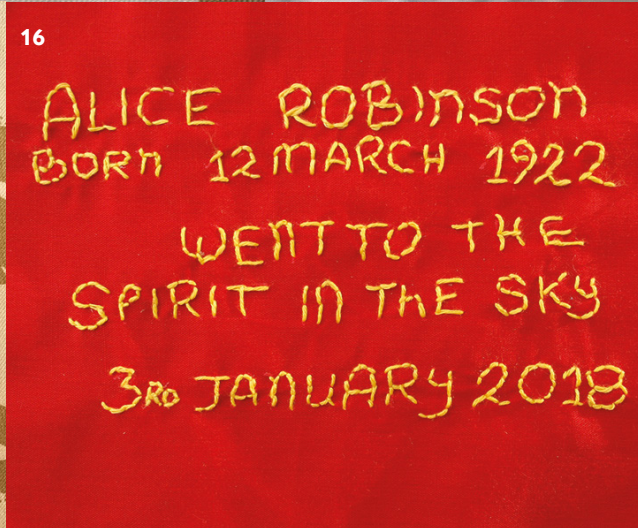
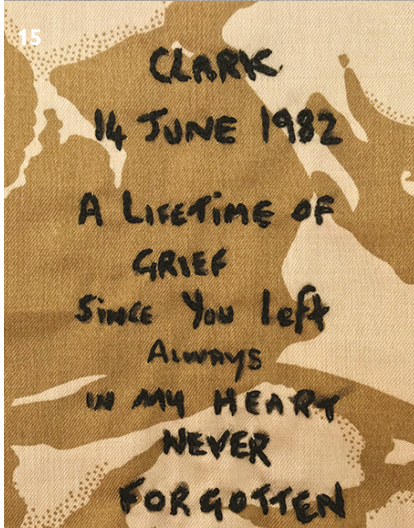
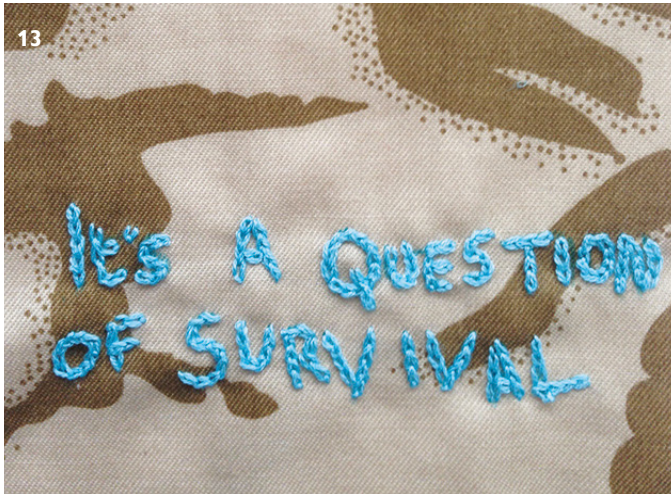
10
Edna Cairns

11
Liz Carter
"The colours were a combination of
Richard's flying suit and his RAF blue
shirt."

12
Kathleen Cockcroft
Kathleen felt that it was important to
reflect that people conscripted for
National Service died in the Korean
War (1950-53), also known as the
forgotten war.

11
Richard
1940-2006
Liz x
out boys

12
KATHLEEN
1931
ROY GIBSON
1931 - 1953
DOING NATIONAL
SERVICE IN KOREA



13
Kathleen Cockcroft
"Your world's turned upside down, but you've got a baby kicking inside of you, so you've got to get on with it. It's a question of survival."

14
Joy Cousins
A strong ray of sunshine
The darkness can overtake you.
So smile and move on.

See poem 'Hope'

15
Theresa Davidson
"[The quilt] means a great deal to me. It's a fantastic idea, and the widows and families of service personnel are often forgotten about, but it's a grief you carry away with you for your whole life. I will take my love for Clark to my grave."

16
Christine Dawson
The yellow thread represents Christine's mum's favourite flower, a daffodil.

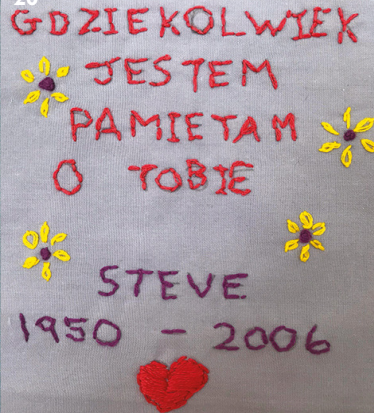
17
Katherine Deans

18
Shirley Dodd Clark
"I chose red, white and blue as a tribute to his RAF life. The red fabric was left over from a cape that he made for our youngest son, a Superman cape. He shared it with his dad on a regular basis, especially when he was recovering from treatments."

19



20



19

Lorna Donaldson

"I always said if he was cut in half he would be like a stick of rock with an RAF roundel through the middle. Although gone, he will be with me forever. Our daughter was born in 1969 and our grandson, who is named for him, was born in 2008. The patch represents our little family."

20

Chris Dziuba

"The words translate as: 'I remember you wherever I am.'"

"It took me back to my school days, stitching a sampler under the beady eye of the needlework mistress!"

21

Joan and Doug
Eggmore
d.o.b. 17.4.14
d.o.d 17.12.47
David d.o.b. 16.9.48

22



21

Joan Eggmore

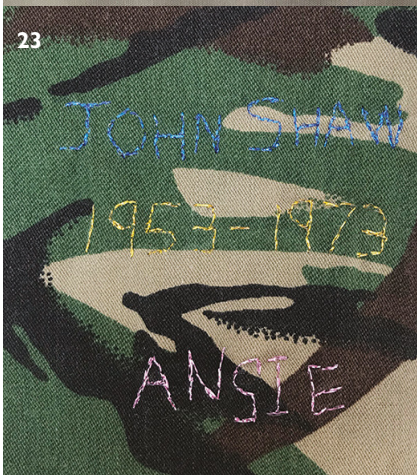
"My husband, Douglas, served in a Map Reproduction Unit, stationed in India until the end of the war in Europe, 1945. We married in 1947. Our son David was born in 1948. When Douglas died I had no idea I was entitled to a pension, and struggled for many years. You just got on with it."

22

Joan Eggmore

"As a child I was influenced by my father's First World War experiences and became a pacifist. This led me to nursing training in Second World War to heal rather than kill. I once asked him why he volunteered. His reply: 'To convert them to socialism.' Well, he certainly failed there!"

23



24

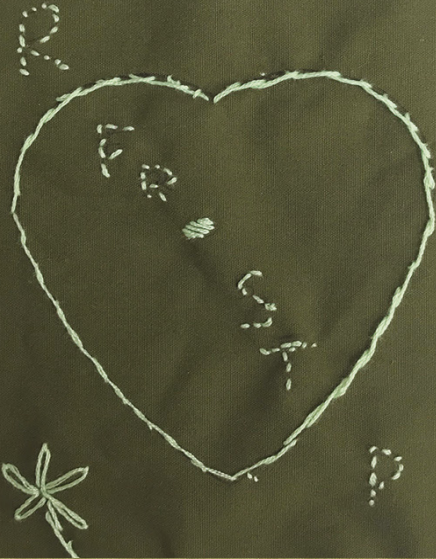


23

Angela Evans

"He will always have a special place in my heart. When you are a war widow you carry on and make another life. You get married, have children and grandchildren and you love them all so much. But you are still a war widow, and behind the smile a sadness remains."

25



26

The Blood
of
Jesus Cleanses
us
From all
Sin.

24

Linda Fisher

Linda Fisher, a WWA trustee, contributed a square in honour of her grandmother who was a war widow. "My grandma, a lovely lady she was."

25

Pam Frost

26

Violet A Gault

Bible quote. John, Chapter 7.

27

Gillian Gibson

28

Wendy Gibson

27

LESLIE BERRISFORD
1957 1994

ARMY AIR CORPS

MARRIED GILLIAN
1987

28

Edward
New
married
Wendy
14-4-1984

29

Annabelle Griffiths

"It's nice that you're working on this. It's a big undertaking. We had been married for 17 years when my husband John was taken from me."

30

Brenda Hillman

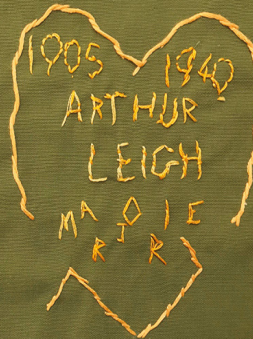
Terry Hillman, Brenda's husband, his dates of birth and of death. Per Ardua (through adversity) is part of the RAF motto, "Per Ardua ad Astra". ("Through adversity to the stars").

29

JOHN GRIFFITHS
N.I.P.S.
MURDERED
06-05-89

30

TERRY
HILLMAN
1931-1988
PER ARDUA
BRENDA
XXXXX



Brenda's second square is for her mother, who was also a war widow.

31

KEN HILL
1934 - 2000
CORISSIMI X
DIANE

32

Brian
Do you mind
if I sit here
down by
your graveside?
1905 - 2004

31

Diane Hill

"I hadn't done any embroidery for 70 years. Having done it I thought it was very therapeutic."

32

Lynn Frances Heaney

We met Lynn at the widows' meeting in Belfast. She told us that her husband used to sing the song Willie McBride as his party piece. She sang us the first few lines. It starts, "Well how d'you do young Willie McBride/ Do you mind if I sit here, down by your graveside?"

33

Helen Hudson

34

Wendy Hutchinson

Wendy wanted to reference PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) on her square as people often do not think of the fact that women have lost their husbands to this condition, including through suicide. "Very important letters these, PTSD."

33

H.P. WOOD
M.W. DZIUBA
ALWAYS
REMEMBERED



34

WENDY HUTCHINSON
24/03/1954
AND 7 CHILDREN
ANTHONY HUTCHINSON
08/05/1956
- 5/12/15
P.T.S.D

35

Margaret Irvine

36

Moira Kane

"Happy again
watching the children
Bright, sunny day creates
yellow-warm feelings
We start with joyful laughter."

See poem 'Hope'

35

SERGEANT
ROBERT
IRVINE
1949-1992
U.D.R. - R.I.R.



36

Moira
and
John
29th December
1976

37

Pte Wilfred McElveen
Murdered By Terrorists
27th Aug 1982 Age 38



38

I HAVE
SURVIVED
WITH A
LITTLE HELP
FROM MY
FRIENDS

37

Margaret McElveen

38

Alberta McMenemy

Alberta's humour and directness shines through. Every time we meet she's welcomed us and shared a joke. But she also has shared her serious side. When we asked about what's important in the war widows' meetings, she said: "Hugs. Here I get hugs, but when I'm back alone with my life I go on a downer".

39

Pearl Moran

Embroidered by Patricia Lois Sales.

39

PEARL MORAN
WILLIAM STUBLEY
HMS KENYA
1931 - 1956

40



40

Mary Moreland

41

Romana Morton

42

Jenny Oates

43

Sylvia Plowman

Sylvia wanted on her piece her husbands name, her name, and Bill's date of death. It was important to Sylvia to add that Bill was injured in Korea, "because nobody remembers that war."

44

Sue Raw

Spring brings
welcome new life
That thrives despite
cruelty and selfishness
And grows within
boundless love.

See poem 'Hope'

41

ROMANA 1968
NIGEL D MORTON
1966 - 2009
21/7/09
43 son

42

DOUGLAS ERIC
GENES 1929 1962
MARRIED JENNY LEE
NOVEMBER 1956
CHILDREN
CHRISTIE 1955
PAUL 1957

43

BILL
KOREA
SYLVIA
15.11.1952

44

ALAN
19.2.51 - 11.7.73
SUE

45

Mabel Rolston

Mabel said about her experience of making her square: "I thought it was a lovely idea. We made them with a group of ladies."

46

Antoinette Rutherford

Antoinette used her late husband's tie appliqué on her square. "I wasn't interested at all, and suddenly I thought: why not? I saw my friends doing it and thought yes, I'll have a go."

47

Ada Jean Scanlan

45

Ernest John Robston
14 October 1992



2 UDR

46

TONI IVOR
RUTHERFORD
1935 - 1935 2012
WITH ME ALWAYS

48

Deanna Selby

This square was the product of much discussion with Deanna. It's a visual poem, joining together the names of John, Deanna, their family, the RAF. He was equally devoted to all. The heart is also a kind of flow diagram of multi-directional love.

49

Violet Simpson


50

Stephanie Smeaton

"Great Uncle George Bremner was killed at the start of the 'Great' War. My husband died in December 1968. He suffered from PTSD resulting from a plane crash in Canada in June 1968. He took his own life. I cannot imagine the mental pain he was going through."

47

ADA JEAN SCANLAN
REMEMBERS
HUSBAND BILL 1993
FATHER HUGHIE 1942
MOTHER ADA
1965



48

JOHN SELBY
24.6.44 7.11.92

DEANNA

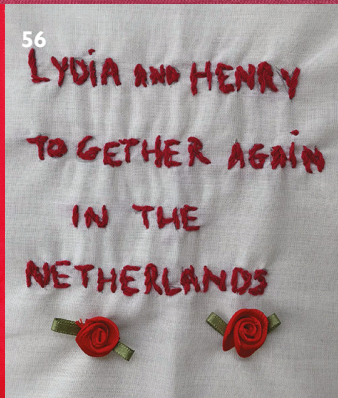
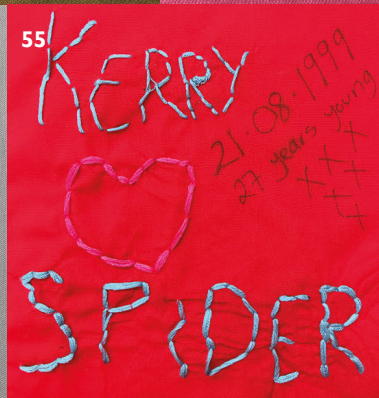
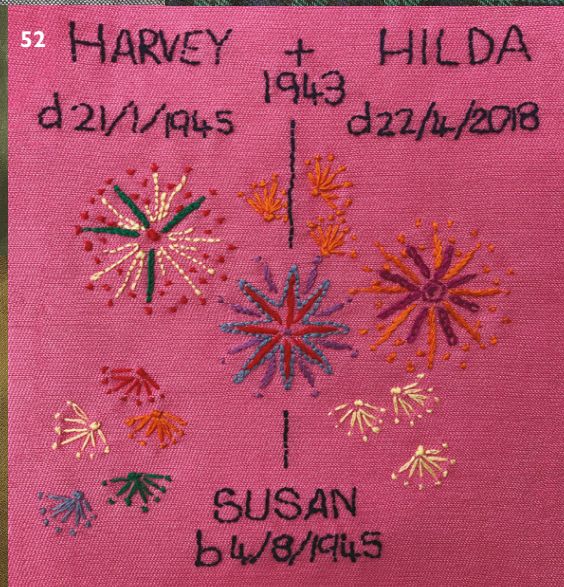
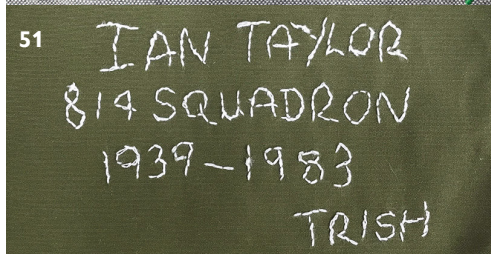
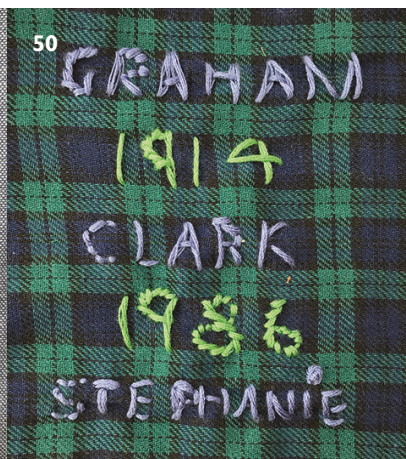
EQUALLY
DEVOTED

FAMILY

51

Patricia Taylor

Embroidered by Patricia Lois Sales.



52

Susan Walker

An embroidery and poem for her parents. The pink fabric is from the dress that Hilda wore when she married her second husband, Ron Pearce, in September 1971.

"You were home on leave
I never saw you again
We had a daughter."

53

Katherine Deans

54

Susan Walker

An embroidery for Susan's mother-in-law, Mary Walker, born 23rd February 1903. "Mary was at the local dance hall one night. George wasn't taking any notice of her, so she stood on a chair and, using sign language common in the cotton mills at that time, communicated: "Dance with me!" "When George was killed, Mary was left to bring up three sons alone. She never remarried."

55

Kerry Webster

"Our story is incomplete as he died when we were both 27 years. [Making the artwork] evoked tons of emotions. It took me a long time to find the courage to do this. Thank you for giving us a voice. We are often forgotten."

56

Lydia White

"My dad was killed in Holland on 18th January 1945. My mum died last year, 9th July aged 96. She always wanted her ashes to be with her husband: together again. I chose the rose as it was my mum's favourite flower. I feel very proud for completing it."

Pockets

Philip Davenport

I have just opened one of the pockets and the shock of the contents runs through me. Family photos, with messages to a dead soldier written on the back. They miss him. They'd like to talk to him about the local football team. They wanted him to hold his grandchild. They feel bitter that he's been taken from them.

The photos show smiling faces, a newborn baby cradled in a woman's arms, her face full of love. It's an intrusion and I want to put the photos back. But these pictures remind me of my own family, my own grief. And suddenly there are tears gathering as I write this.

I wonder about the power of putting these treasured objects into the pockets. Is it about letting go? Or sharing? Some of the widows have sewn have their pockets shut, some are happy for us to look inside. But can we really understand?

Pockets

*What would you put in your top pocket to help you survive difficult times? It could be a thing, or simply an idea?
What does it feel like next to your heart?*

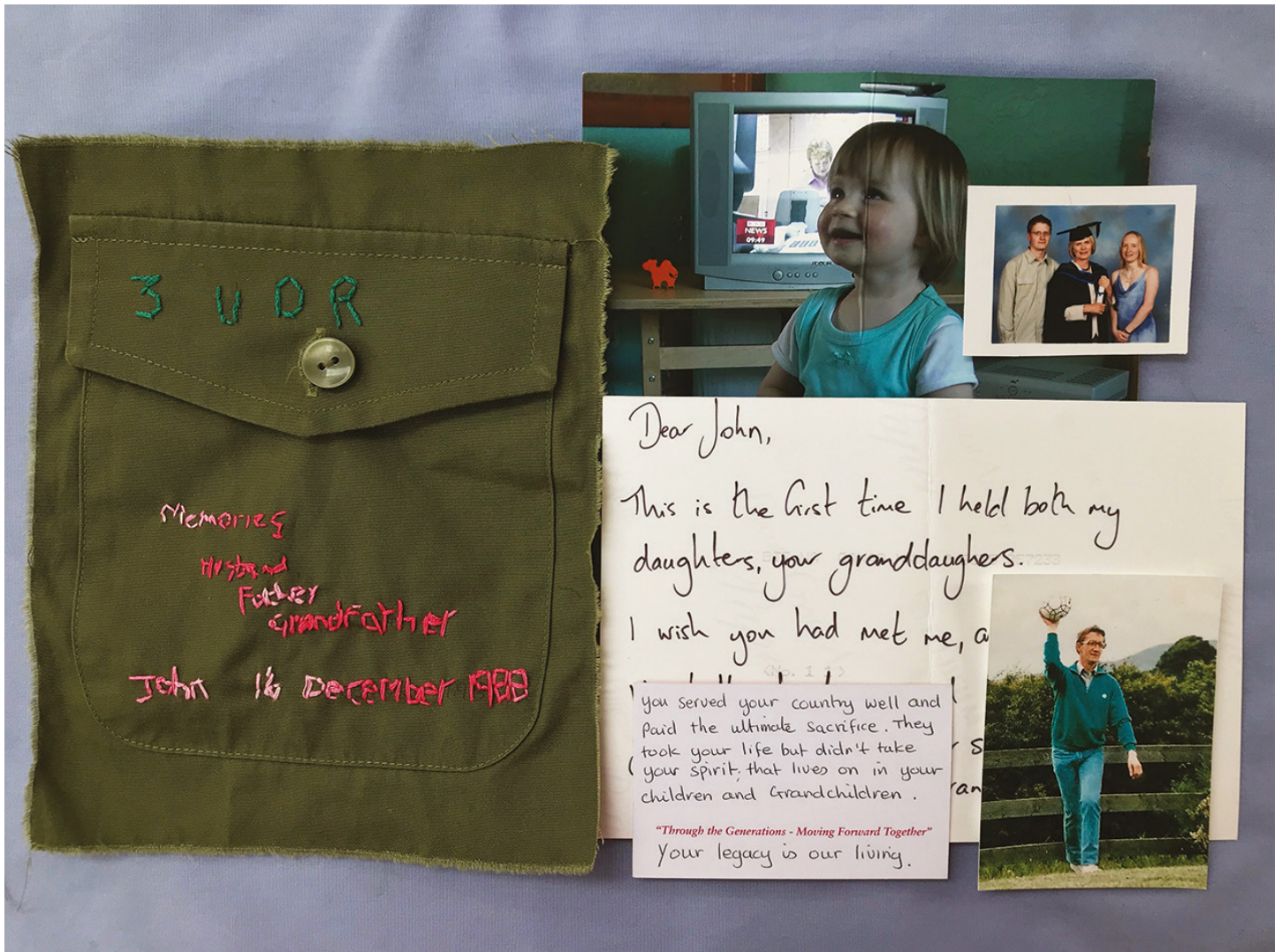
"The things we felt but never
Ever had the chance to say"
'So Long Ago' Brenda Hillman

Within the body of this quilt are pockets containing hidden lives. Inside those pockets are writings, photos, memories. Some are sewn shut. Their contents are not for sharing, never have been and maybe never will. They are secrets, but here their presence is acknowledged at least. Others can be opened, their contents to be held, seen, read.

Often the writings are poems, each an act of communication with a person no longer here, with the dead. But they also tell of the experience of the one who is left, a war widow.



Sulvia Humphries:
embroidered pocket



Mary Moreland: pocket and contents



Kate Thomas: pocket and contents



Frail fronds, like ferns, unfold
a frame for flowers
unfolding,
fair, fleeting fancies.

LOIS AND PHILIP
IT WAS SUCH A JOY TO MEET
YOU BOTH AT OUR WAR WIDOWS
MEETING IN BELFAST.
I ENJOYED CREATING THIS
MEMORIAL TO A VERY SPECIAL
HUSBAND AND DEDICATED

HONOUR THE FALLEN

SERVICE NUMBER
24456821

SERGEANT ROBERT JAMES IRVINE

MASTER DEFENCE REGIMENT 1978-JUNE 1992

ROYAL IRISH REGIMENT JUNE 1992-20 OCT. 1992

PAID THE
ULTIMATE
SACRIFICE



20TH OCTOBER
1992

POPPY
A TIME OF REFLECTION AND
REMEMBRANCE, RECALLING
HAPPIER TIMES.

SUMMER
EVERYTHING BUDS FORTH AND
COMES TO FRUITION AND NEW
LIFE AGAIN.

UNTIL WE MEET AGAIN IN
FULL ASSURANCE OF A BLESSED
HOPE, BY FAITH AND PRAYER
IN OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST.
GOD IS OUR STRENGTH AND
HEAVEN OUR ETERNAL HOME.

MARGARET IRVINE.

MARGARET
X O

TILL WE
MEET
AGAIN

My M
Acts 20:32 98.89 Ref.
Mk 5:19 L.M. Ref.
For all the Lord has done for
me,
I never will cease to praise Him;
And for His grace so rich and free
I never will cease to praise Him.
I never will cease to praise Him,
My Saviour, my Saviour;
I never will cease to praise Him,
He's done so much for me.
He gives me strength for every
day,
I never will cease to praise Him;
He leads and guides me all the
way,
I never will cease to praise Him.
Although the world His love
neglect,
I never will cease to praise Him;
I could not such a friend reject,
I never will cease to praise Him.
He saves me every day and hour,
I never will cease to praise Him;
Just now I feel His cleansing
power,
I never will cease to praise Him.
While on my journey here below,
I never will cease to praise Him;
And when to that bright world I
go,
I never will cease to praise Him.
Charles Hutchinson Gabriel, 1856-1932

ON THE WINGS OF A PRAYER

Just close your Eyes and open your heart,
And feel your worries and cares depart.
Just yield yourself to the Father above,
And let him hold you secure in his love.

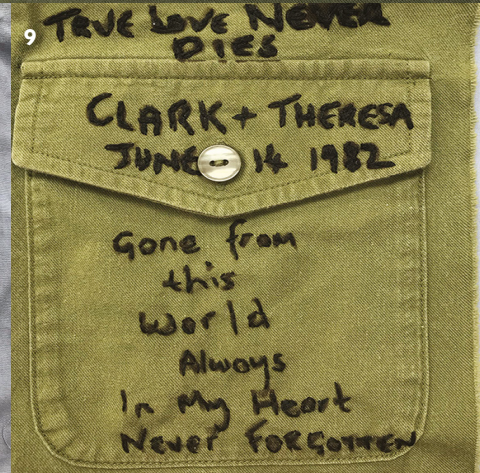
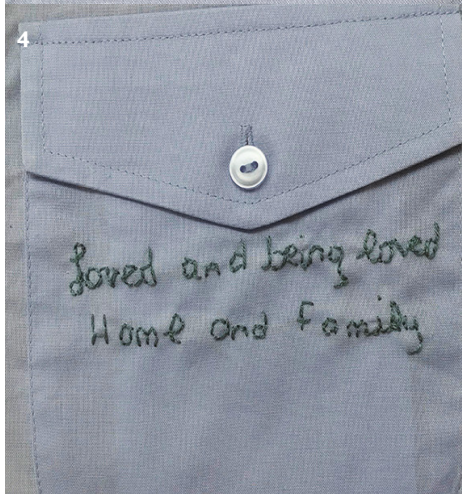
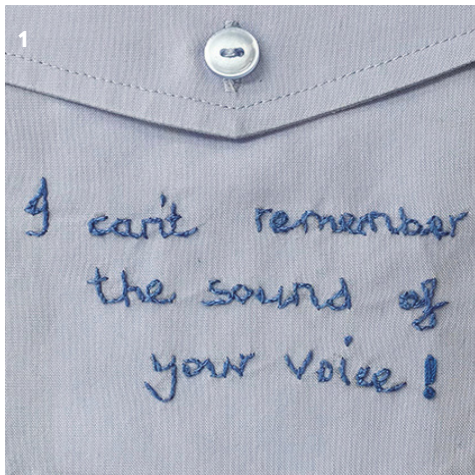
For life on earth grows more involved,
With endless problems that can't be solved,
But God only ask us to do our best,
Then he will take over and finish the rest...

So when you are tired, discouraged and blue,
There is always one door that is open to you,
And that is the door to The House of Prayer,
And you'll find God waiting to meet you there.
And The House of Prayer is no further away,
than the quiet spot where you kneel and pray.

For the heart is a temple when God is there
As we place ourselves in his loving care.
And he hears every prayer and answers each one
When we Pray in His name - Thy will be done.
The burdens that seemed too heavy to bear
Are lifted away on the wings of a prayer.

By Helen Graham

Margaret Irvine: pocket and
contents



1

Anonymous

Inside the pocket is a note which reads:

"Magic Moments" was our song
The Jukebox played, we'd sing along
Memories Remain - strong and clear
After 38 years, I shed a tear.
I can't even remember the sound of
your voice!"

See poem 'How to Be a War Widow'

4

Joan Bloomer

Inside this pocket is a poem that reads:

"Farmer, a hard worker carrying
Two little boys and a lamb in his hood
Loved and being loved
and along comes Philip"
Joan reworked and reworked this poem. There are several versions. She was trying to balance the death of a beloved husband with the joy their children brought.

7

Joy Cousins

Inside the pocket is a poem that reads:

"Farewell to those we once loved
Gone, drifted into the clouds
Floating around my dreams at night
With no time to say good bye.
No time to ponder o'er the past
Of happy times and love that last
I must cope with life alone
And help our youngsters care and grow.
Memories are mine to keep
And please O Lord let him sleep
I will try not to weep
And hope some day we will meet."

2

Susan Amyes

Inside the pocket are a poem and a penny dated 1964, the date of Susan's marriage.

"Mother taught me lots of things
How to love your child
How to cook
How to sew
How to be a war widow."

5

Marjorie Bourne

"Looking back with love
Visiting the place of your birth
'Welcome home,' they said."
Marjorie talked about a significant journey she'd made with her daughters, taking them back to the place of their birth in Penang. Their father had died there and the girls hadn't really known him. Going there brought them back to their birthplace for the first time since they left. It gave them their roots

8

Frances Croxon-Hall

"Snowdrops is the nickname of the RAF Police." Inside the pocket is a poem that reads:

"Close to me you will remain.
Your smile, laughter and love abide
Within my heart and soul always.

Cpl Kevin Peter Hall RAF Police.
11th March 1964 to 8th June 2011."

3

Ann Bacon

Inside the pocket is a poem that reads:

"Heaven is my hope
Red Rose
Summertime Sunny Days"

6

Irene Card

Inside the pocket is a poem that reads:

"As long as hearts remember
As long as hearts still care
We do not part with those we love
They're with us everywhere
xxx."

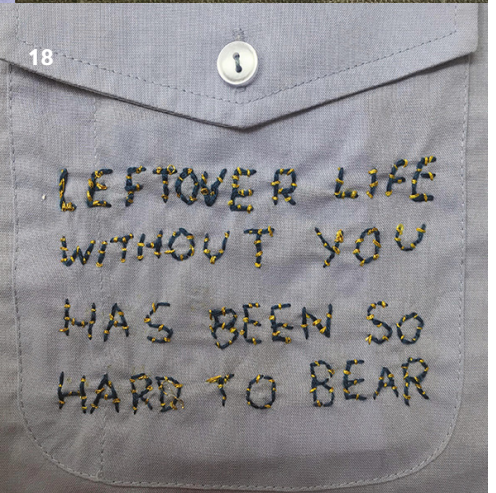
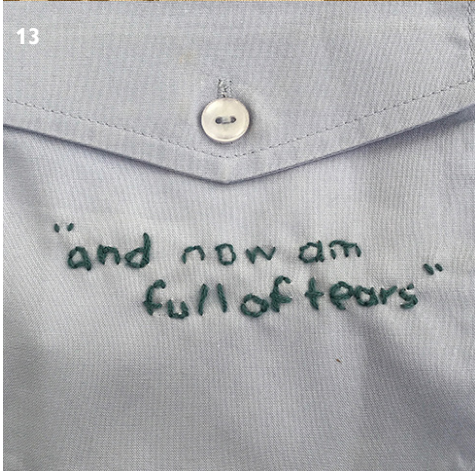
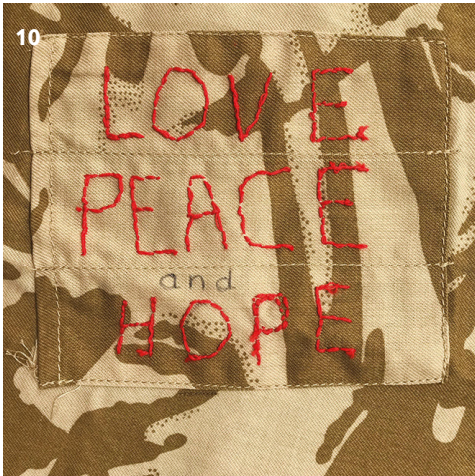
Embroidered by Diane Hill

9

Theresa Davidson

Inside the pocket is a photo of Clark. On the back is written:

"Clark in Chelsea Bks 1981 Sgt's
Mess. 25 years old. Killed June 1982
on Mount Tumbledown, Falkland
Islands. Missed and loved always."



10

Katherine Deans

13

Joan Eggmore

"He was unwell. He knew he was dying, leaving me. I didn't know what to do, my life was shattered. The poem was apposite: he was dying, leaving me. I was foolish, I didn't know what to do. My life was shattered and in despair."

"And now am full of tears."
W. B. Yeats

See poem 'Lazy Daisy'

16

Lynn Frances Heaney

11

Katherine Deans

Inside each pocket a different poem, inside the "Navy" pocket is a poem that reads:

"Sailors sailed
Soldiers marched
Airmen flew"

14

Angela Evans

"We had known each other for a few years, but had only been married for 4 months. He was young, sweet, funny and handsome, but then he was gone. All this happened a long time ago, but I remember as if it was yesterday."

"If you have a love
make sure they know
If you have a love
Never let them go."

17

Violet Gault

Inside the pocket is a poem that reads:

"Send me the pillow that you dream on, so darling I can dream on it too."

"My husband was a singer and he used to sing this song to me before we got married."

12

Movita Durber

Inside the pocket is a poem that reads:

"I am with you still"

15

Kathleen Finlay

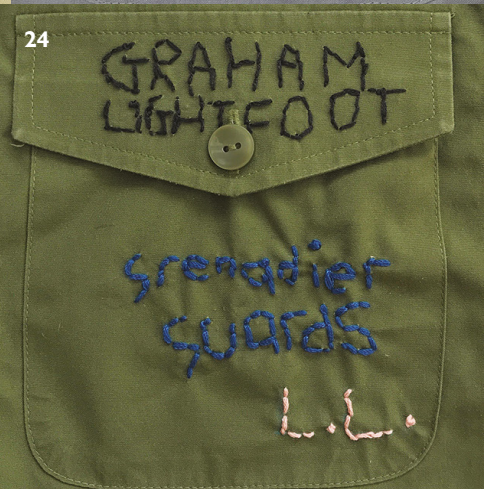
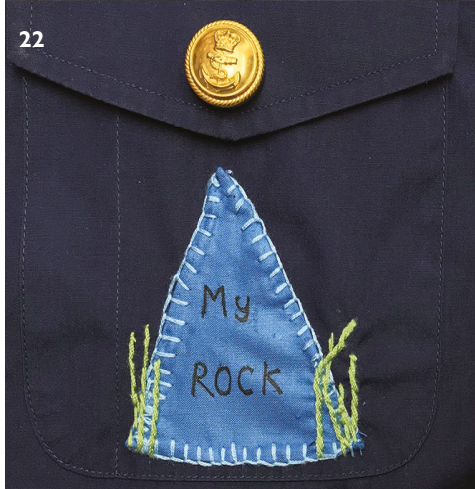
Kathleen was concerned that her husband's memory and the memory of what happened to him would fade into forgetting. "It matters to me." The embroidery shows hope anchored in the future.

18

Brenda Hillman

"My thoughts go back to Terry's funeral in Kuala Lumpur, when I had to leave him behind. I find I envy those who are able to stay close to the remains of their loved ones. I realise that thousands of widows were worse off than I was as they were not present at their husbands' burials."

See poem 'So Long Ago'



19

Sulvia Humphries

"The pocket contains a picture of our children a few months after their dad died. It is a picture that always reminds me of just how young they were. The initials K and S stand for Ken and Sulvia.

I was not sure I could do this piece but I did. The children are now 50 and 52 and are a wonderful legacy to their dad."

22

Angela Jones

"[This project] helps me rekindle with lovely thoughts about Cliff. He was a gentle man and steady, steady as a rock. He proposed twice - would I marry the Navy and would I marry him! We had many very happy years that ended all too soon. Widowhood is loneliness. I have moved house five times since Cliff died, in search of him and happiness."

25

Jenny Oates

"This piece of work is a tribute to Annie Pinkerton, our much-loved editor of 'Courage' for many years. R.I.P lovely lady."

20

Margaret Irvine

"Till we meet again in prayer, faith and assurance of a certain hope.

Springtime - everything comes to fruition and buds forth and comes to life again."

23

Jo Jukes

Jo's husband, Lance Corporal Dave Jukes, died by suicide in 2018 after suffering from severe PTSD and having served in the armed forces for over 20 years. The embroidered words are part of a tattoo Dave had planned to have done shortly before his death: 'Only God can judge me, but only I know the love I have for my wife and my girls.'

Jo founded *For the Fallen* to support armed forces families bereaved by suicide and to help prevent suicide in the military community.

26

Deanna Selby

21

Maureen Jarvis

"A pale blue shirt would be my choice, as that is what my husband would have worn. And as for a flower, a forget-me-not. I would love to put a photo of our new grandchild with her father in the pocket - the granddaughter my late husband never got to meet."

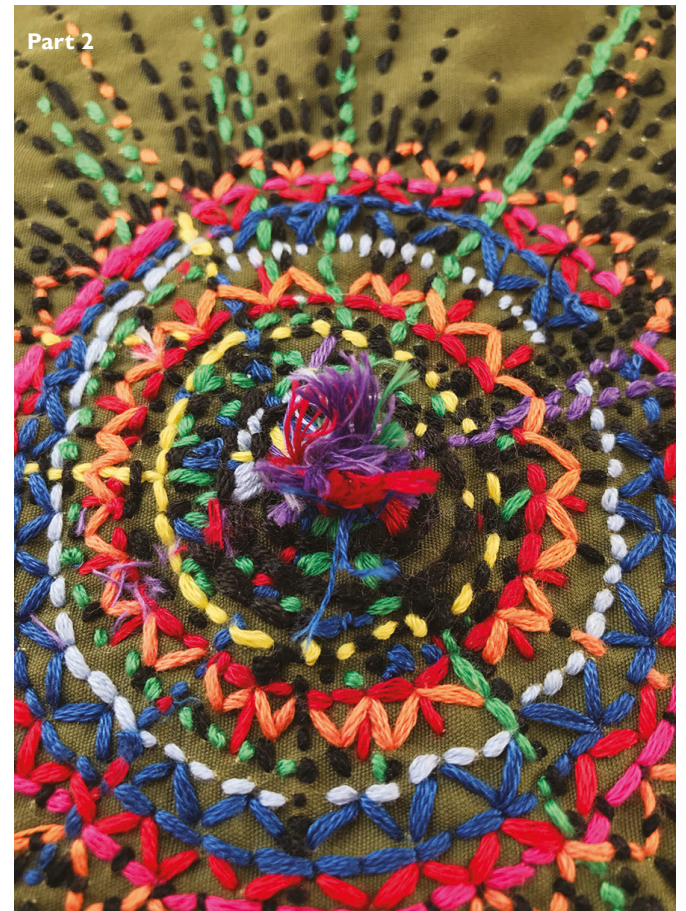
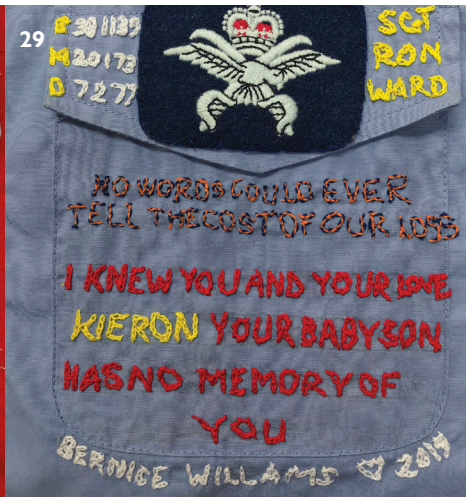
24

Lynne Lightfoot

27

Dorothy Symonds

"'Thoughts too deep for tears'
Writes the poet Wordsworth in his wisdom. I have proved him wrong."



28
Kate Thomas

Part 1

Lauran Hamilton

"The red cross is for four dead soldiers. The green on the top of the pocket represents the gorse bushes that grew in the area where they died. The silver thread is the grey of the twisted Land Rover. The green is the grass in the field. The brown is the turned-over soil of the land mixed with the blood of the four men. The yellow and purple are the flowers from the hedgerows."

29
Bernice Williams
 "The most poignant was that Kieron didn't know his father."

Part 2

Lauran Hamilton

"This started off as a calendar for every year that [he] has been dead. The centre is the day he died. Then I stitched in black, 'the darkest days', working out missed birthdays, anniversaries, children's first steps, etc. It developed into my 'grief wheel', and as I worked on it I realised that it was never-ending, so I stopped stitching. I was wondering if I could make a Part 3, a lighter piece."

See *poem* 'The Border'

30
Pauline Worden-Kelly
 "It's a lovely tribute to a wonderfully brave and courageous man, who suffered without complaint and whom it was a privilege to support and care for, until he left behind a broken heart that I can never recover, until we are joined together again. The constant longing gets wearisome. Once more thank you."

Flowers

Lois Blackburn

If you were a flower, which one would you be? Rose, daisy,
dandelion, delphinium, buttercup?

Which flower represents
something essential in you?

Which could be your
memorial?

Flowers can be many things to us. They send love, they commemorate, they survive. Sunflowers are symbols of happiness. Roses stand for passion. Snowdrops bring hope after winter (although a Snowdrop is also the nickname for an RAF military policeman) a carnation is worn at a wedding. And red poppies are for those who die as a result of war.

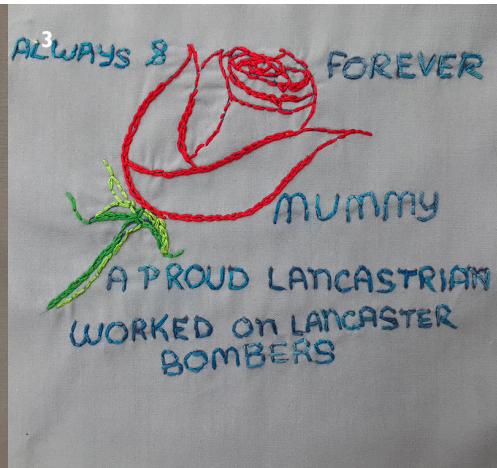
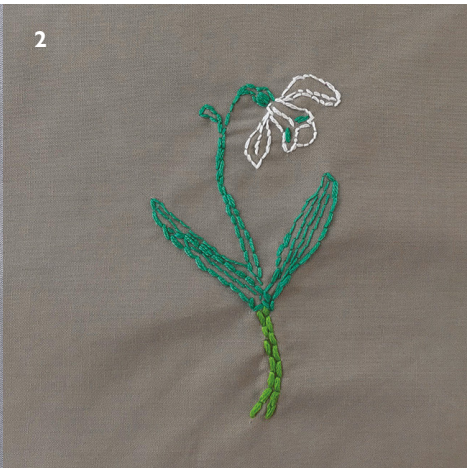
"No matter what you
do to them, they lift
their little heads up
and smile at you"

'Snowdrop' by **Kathleen Cockcroft**

The flowers growing on this quilt bring symbolism, but most of all they are survivors. They come back year on year, tiny, delicate, yet undefeated. When we asked the war widows what flower they would choose to represent themselves, or their memories, their answers brought many layers of meaning — sometimes clear, sometimes camouflaged. And always they bring life.



Jenny Oates:
embroidered flower



1

Anonymous

"The Rose Bud. I placed one on John's coffin, 38 years ago, and one has been put on his grave every Christmas to celebrate our wedding anniversary. I would have liked to put that date on the flower piece.

"We married on Boxing Day, 26 December 1958."

4

Katherine Deans

"The flower is a rose, just to signify love for everyone."

7

Angela Evans

"A long time ago, when I was widowed, I did an oil painting of a rose, and it gave me comfort at the time. It has been a nice opportunity to do another rose but in embroidery. My first husband John died in July 1973 at age 19, in Belfast. He was so young, sweet, funny and handsome, but then he was gone. I remember it as if it was yesterday."

2

Kathleen Cockcroft

"Snowdrops: They survive the winter, then suddenly come from nowhere. It makes you realise in a few weeks the nights will get lighter. No matter what you do to them they come back and lift their little heads and smile at you. They can push through snow."

5

Movita Durber

8

Wendy Gibson

"Dear Ned. I have chosen the orange lily to represent you, because of our culture, traditions and what they mean to us personally. The orange lily is a symbol of the Orange Order in Northern Ireland, which you were a member of. You were born on the 11th July, which is a cause of celebration. On this day the orange lily would be proudly placed on instruments and drums. It symbolizes confidence, pride, wealth, which is how I feel about you. All my love, Wendy"

3

Christine Dawson

Embroidered for Christine's mother.

6

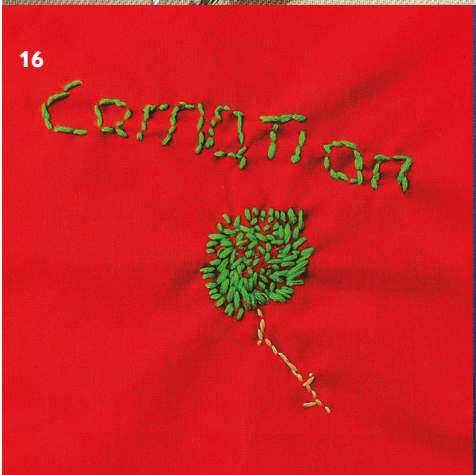
Joan Eggmore

9

Lauran Hamilton



Orchid for Sylvia
Plowman.



10
Lauran Hamilton

"Part 3."

"Each flower represents people who I feel have helped me in my life since Brad died. I have left space as I hope I may meet some more inspirational people on my journey. I have sewn a flower for you and the War Widows Stories team. Thank you so much for everything. It's been a wonderful experience."

13
Sylvia Plowman

"I'm making up for when I was younger, when I had nothing. They were a rich persons flower, now anyone can afford them. I love orchids, they're very elegant, delicate and last for weeks and weeks. The orchids are me."

Embroidered by Patricia Lois Sales

16
Maureen Skapars

"For my mum: carnations. She had them in her wedding bouquet."

11
Paul Harris

Paul's square commemorates his mother, who was a war widow.

"Symbol of hope = the unknown Lies ahead. Positive with the afterlife What feeds hope? As above."

Paul said that he was very touched to have been included in the workshop and was able to reflect on his grief through the poetry and stitching.

See poem 'Hope'

14
Sue Raw

Spring brings welcome new life
That thrives despite cruelty
and selfishness
And grows within boundless love.

17
Kathleen Tasker

I have chosen a poppy because it is a symbol of remembrance. My husband was a Royal Marine and the Royal Marines' official colours are navy blue, red, green and yellow. My embroidery incorporates all these colours.

12
Lynne Lightfoot

"This poppy is a chain of events leading to many lives that have been lost. They lost more than their lives, they lost their next generation and the next. Heaven's doors must have been open wide, to give them everlasting peace. Blood, sweat and tears went into this poppy."

See poem 'How to Be a War Widow'

15
Deanna Selby

"We planted a rose bush that first year In memory of you, with many a tear
It has grown, it has thrived,
sometimes Struggled but survived.
So have we.
This year a single blossom grew
In silent remembrance of you
Two generations of family dear
Mourn your loss because you aren't here
Just like the rose
They've thrived and grown
As the thread of your life
Through love your seed is sewn.
You bind us together. Forever."

18
Kate Thomas

"The tulip is my favourite flower."

Kate also wrote about anemones, her grandma's favourite. "A beautiful if short lived flower, a fleeting life, rather like us."



Mary Moreland

"I am a snowdrop. The perfect flower to show the resilience of war widows. The snowdrop is delicate, unassuming, but strong, the first flower to herald the onset of spring, the beginning a new year. No matter how hard the ground is, no matter how cold or inclement the weather, the snowdrop pushes its way through. The biggest snowfalls don't deter it, and when the snow has gone the snowdrop will still be there. It appears year after year no matter what is thrown at it. Strong, just as a war widow has to be strong, fighting to be seen as an integral part of the Armed Forces Community - still fighting."

Poems

Philip Davenport

How do we use words for all this? Are words enough? Many of the poems in this book were made with tears as their accompaniment. Or with friends around, helping each other through. They commemorate the dead, and commemorate those who continue, their struggles and their moments of breakthrough as they rebuild a life, bring up children, see other new beginnings, and other endings. The poems speak over and over of loss, of friendships and of children. They speak with honesty, humour and at times with extraordinary bravery. They brim over with emotion, with life, even in the face of death.

"Spring brings / the children
Bright day, yellow-warm feelings
We start with joyful laughter."

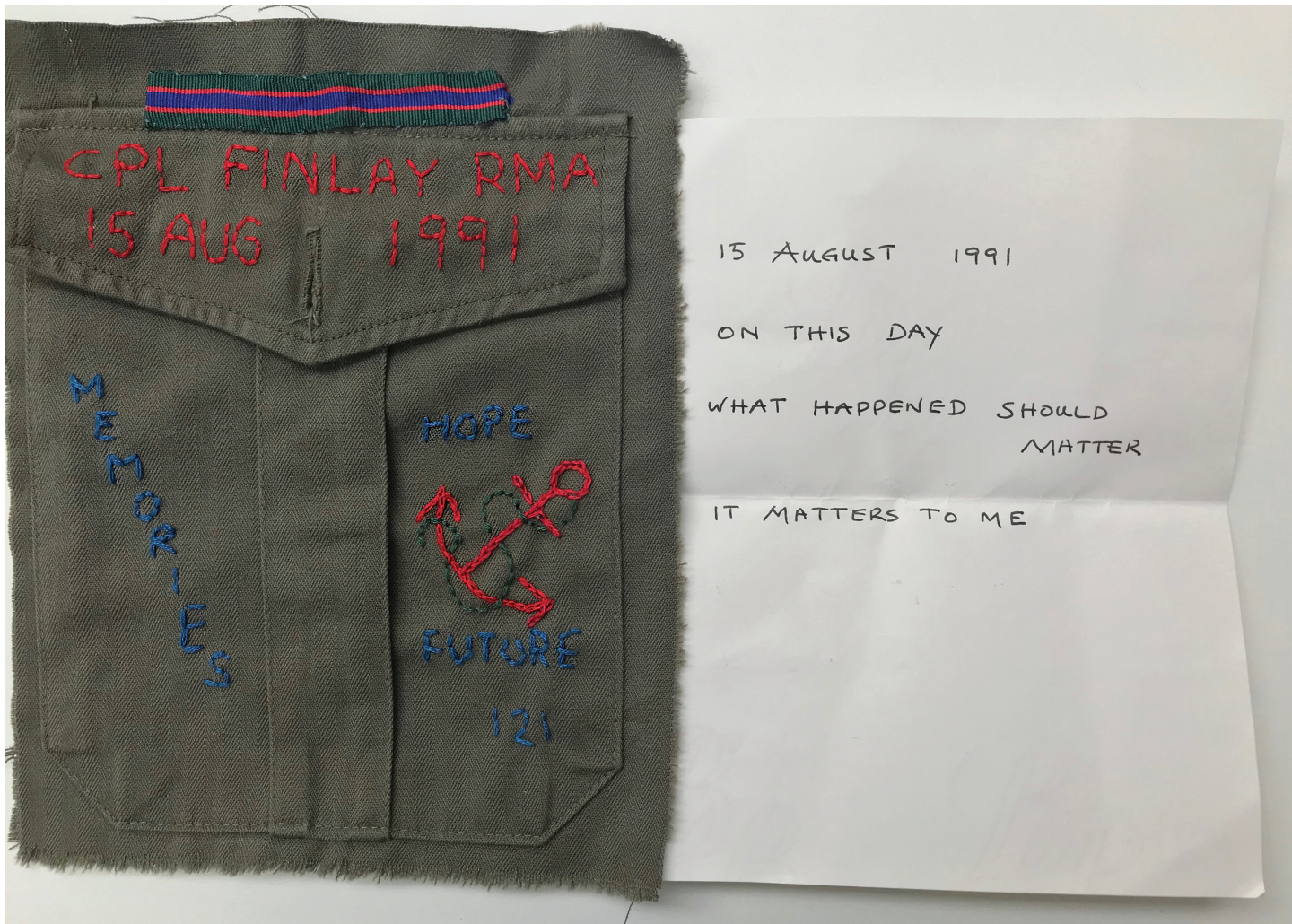
'Hope' Various writers

The gatherings in which these pieces were made have been full of warmth and laughter, too. They too, claim back life. This haiku was written about a long journey from Britain, halfway round the world, to take children back to the place of their birth and their father's death.

"Looking back with love
Visiting the place of your birth
"Welcome home!" they said."

'Finding Roots' Marjorie Bourne

Always shining through is friendship. Friendship is the heart of it, at the social occasions, the meetings, the parades, the workshops.



Kathleen Finlay: pocket and contents

Poems

The loyalty that we've seen in the War Widows' Association is ever-present, continually renewed. At a workshop in an Arboretum, three friends came together to joke, cajole, gently encourage and finally to cry together, one of the sweetest examples of human togetherness you could see.

"Sewing with others
 Considering
 Whether to embroider
 As the leaves grow on the tree
 As the grass grows on the weir
 As I am full of tears."

'Lazy Daisy' Various writers

Then ringing around these works are more jagged emotions, many of them facets of anguish. Gathered like a dark bouquet: loneliness, fear, hopelessness. Many, many angers. The anger of loss, the anger of feeling cheated out of happiness, the anger of perceived injustices, the anger of being unheard, disregarded. The lines below stem from a vast anger and the carrying on of memory here is out of a sense of outrage that violent death can ever be forgotten:

"On this day
 What happened should matter
 It matters to me."

Kathleen Finlay

As this quilt was made, as the poems were written, the wider stories were being recorded, a history that's not been heard before.

It's an account of war that's both devastatingly intimate and told from a distance.

The whole quilt is a poem, although it's not on a page. It can be read by following the words around the border (which is a collage of several people's words) or by moving between the words embroidered on the patches, or by looking in the pockets, or by all of those things.

The poems and stitches record histories of hurting and also of healing. Just as a wound can be stitched, perhaps memories can be stitched too. Look carefully at these threads, these traces, they are another kind of telling. And then there's the fear of tearing the wound open, of toppling once more into disaster:

"I hope my embroidery has not
 gone over
 It is very close to the edge."

'Lazy Daisy' Various writers

Deeply woven here is the texture of experience, it's in the writing, the images, the symbols, in every careful stitch. Embroidery is like writing and drawing in slow motion, it allows space for reflection and memory. And from all these people comes one gathered piece. A choir of voices, a sewing circle, a page, a quilt.

Work like this follows ancient traditions of commemoration: these are the marks we leave to show people we loved them.

The Border

Various writers

Do you mind if I sit here
 Down by your graveside?
 Deep in us you're living yet
 Forever young. Never forget.
 And it's right men are remembered.

But

- what about the next chapter? Us.
 A life has been lost and now
 Is made - something new.

It's a story that needs telling.
 How kind people make life worth living
 How you keep on plodding.
 How we all need a say.

The darkest days, stitched in black
 Working out missed birthdays,
 Anniversaries, Children's first steps.

Can't tell the story of war
 Without the story of war widows.

Can't remember the sound
 Of your voice. Of hope.
 I tried to inject colour
 Behind the smile, sadness remains
 There are many kinds of damage
 And many kinds of brave.

The Box

Bernice Williams

*In memory of Sgt Ron Ward (RAF) who died
unexpectedly on 7 February 1977, when his son
Kieron was just 6 months old.*

Silent, hidden deep away from all
most of the time.

Weeks, months, years, shut tight
long ago, when life ebbed away.

Death stole love and joy
a life full of promises
never to be realised
snatched cruelly.

The baby - perfect, wanted, cherished,
destined never to know a father:
a voice, a face,
a father's touch or reprimand.

Year on year the box sinks deeper
yet the essence
locked inside
stays unchanged.

The key... a word
a memory, a name, a tune
... outpours raw, heart-rending pain
for something long-gone.

Buried deep though it is
the burden has never been greater.
Time highlights adoring young
love, still as fresh but unrequited

half a century on.

Hope

Poem extracts from Joy Cousins, Janet Fookes, Jenny Green, Claire Mackay, Paul Harris, Sue Raw, Anne Rickwood.

Spring brings children
Bright days, yellow-warm feelings
We start with joyful laughter.

Birds sing
Their dawn chorus reminds that
Small joys matter

Spring shoots
Pushing out melancholy
Giving life to

Sunshine.
The darkness can overtake you
So smile and move on.

Candle flicking
In the darkness of time
End of the tunnel brightly lit.

Sun and rain on sea
I trace the rainbow through rain
And my angel speaks.

What feeds hope? As above.

Lazy Daisy

*Marjorie Bourne, Deanna Selby, Kathleen Cahillane,
Stephanie Smeaton, Susan Walker, Joan Bloomer,
and Violet Gault. Lines enclosed in pockets.*

I enclose herewith my embroidery.
How could I forget the
Lazy Daisy stitch?
Little snow-white feet
Pink fabric from the wedding-dress.
How could I forget?

I hope my embroidery has not gone over
It is very close to the edge.
The pain he was going through
How could I forget?
But I was young and foolish.
Sewing with others
Considering
Whether to embroider
As the leaves grow on the tree
As the grass grows on the weir
As I am full of tears.

A labour of love
I enclose herewith my embroidery
He used to sing this to me:
“Send me the pillow that you dream on...”
On my leaning shoulder yet
Lazy Daisy, how could I forget?

My Husband's Name

*Poem spoken by
Rita Armin and Wendy Hutchinson*

He said to me:
“I’d do it all again.”
And then he forgot how to laugh.
I was trying to hold the kids together
And the last thing he told me:
The laughter’s gone.
I write my husband’s name, plus —
Important letters these — PTSD

A different chapter.
Nursed him 30 years
And then done. My son said
“Doesn’t he look young?”
All the pain from his face gone
No more
The useless man, forgotten.
Plummeting to the ground.

And when he was too ill, he said
“Will you represent me
On Remembrance Day?
Go and wear my medals.”
And I have, every one.
The poppies make a wave
Some days I’m wild for him.
I’m happy for him some days.

Untitled

Brenda Hillman

So long ago I had to leave you
Lying in a foreign land
Had to say goodbye to you
And to all the things we'd planned.

Leftover, life without you
Has been so hard to bear
The dreams we dreamt that never
Were to see the light of day.

The things we felt but never
Ever had the chance to say
The tender moments we could no longer share
Since that dark day I had to leave you
Lying in a stranger's care.



Alberta McMenemy

Encounters

Lois Blackburn

Lead Artist

Philip Davenport

Lead Writer

“This is the most interesting meeting I’ve ever been to. There have been things to think about. It’s made things seem real: it’s made me re-evaluate how to think about war widows.

Having something to make, to do, [the quilt] makes you feel part of it. I’m proud of being a Plymouth member, but now I feel part of the wider group of war widows. We learn from each other.”

Irene

The meeting echoed others with the war widows: a group of women who we’ve never met before, a short time describing the project, a little quiet conversation and contemplation, then people start to open up, share memories of their late husbands, speak of the drive for survival for themselves, their children. Of the mess of emotions, the hierarchy surrounding widowhood: husbands who died in conflict and those who died after as a result of conflict. We talked of campaigns for pension rights, for better recognition ... and much else. And there was lots of laughter, too.

Out of the awful situation of being widowed and out of the grief, friendships have been made. Amazing friendships. They wouldn’t have met if it hadn’t been for shared disaster. The bond that they have is special.

In the best workshops there is often joking. But when people work they are in earnest, and they encourage one another. Walking with one another through the darkest times in order to get to the light. A lot of friendships never get to that stage. Here they trust and encourage each other to experience the sadness, because it leads to release.

And then, gently, come tears.

It is always a matter of great delicacy when somebody cries in a workshop with us. Not because crying is in anyway wrong, but it is a sign that things are connecting very deeply. There’s a big upswell of emotion. This needs to be respected and acknowledged, but not always discussed. Sometimes when there are tears, a little quiet is what’s needed next.

Encounters

Allowing space to grieve, rather than shutting it down.

The writing made during this project is very direct, giving dates of death and looking at what had happened square on. But events like these aren't so simply explained. The echoes continue and continue. A child looks like their missing father. A particular day is loaded with dread. The absence is huge, too big to deal with all at once. The need to carry on for family is paramount. Grief gets brushed to one side and stays unhealed. A gentle hubbub of conversation. People settle into the rhythm of the sewing and writing and share experiences with their neighbours. Stories of details that had been forgotten. A camping trip, a tattoo, two children on their father's shoulders.

It's often with little things that the big things are said. Where we could, we helped people write down the words, or stitch.

We ran workshops and joined afternoon teas and lunches all over Great Britain. In Belfast, over sandwiches and a cup of tea, we talked about the weather, about memories of childhood — and then suddenly we were discussing a man being killed and his child running away from the scene of the killing, covered in blood, and shattered glass. How do you say all this? How do you deal with all this? At the end, as we were getting ready to leave, Alberta, our host, answered the question: "Hugs."

And yes, love is one answer among the many we heard. One of the widows said: "Here people hug me. But when I get back home I'm on my own with my life again and I go on a downer."

To be a widow is not simple. It is as complex as every individual in the room, with their many triumphs and tragedies. When we were in Belfast, a shadow presence was the word "Troubles". The conflict that still echoes through this place, and through many of the people here.

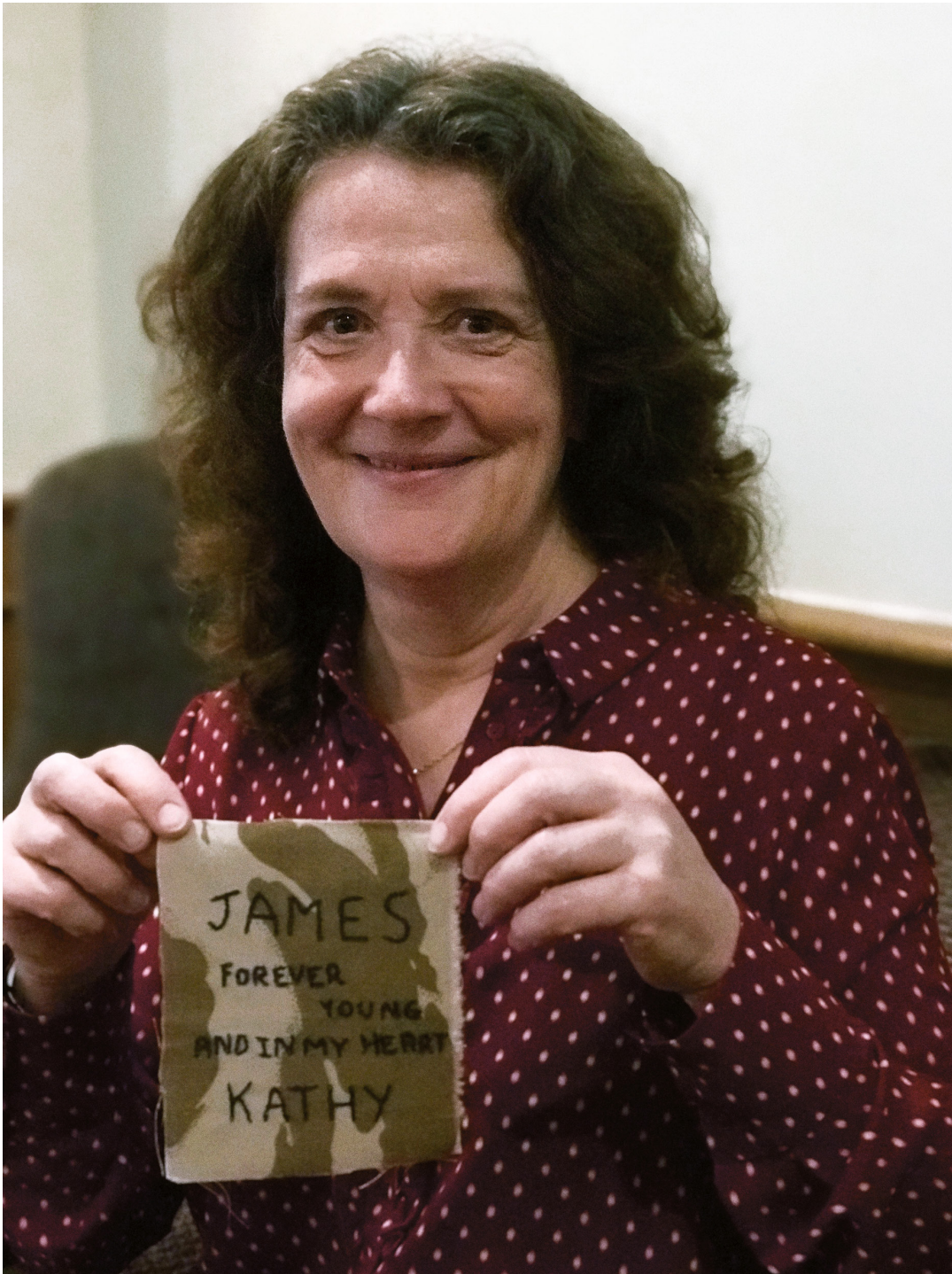
Making art or poems together allows deeply-layered conversations to happen, sometimes finding expression for what's only partly known.

"Never underestimate the power of the collective. Those people that you never wanted to meet become friends and family. Don't underestimate how much speaking to people who have the same experience helps, how valuable that is."

Sue Raw

This has been a remarkable project. We have heard about tragic losses, and the knock-on effects that can last for a lifetime. But we will also remember the welcome, the laughter, the good food and drink, and the dancing. We won't forget the Gay Gordons at the Edinburgh AGM in a hurry!

Our first encounter with the War Widows' Association was at a London meeting. It was the usual wonderful mix of laughter, lively discussion, and food. Lots of food. We were rather taken a back when the women started to stitch. It was 10 o'clock at night. We had a fabulous impromptu late-night embroidery session. Unfinished work was carefully wrapped to be completed on train journeys home, in precious moments of peace.



Kathleen Cahillane

A Short History

Nadine Muller

When we think of war widows, we imagine their husbands died on a battlefield. But what if a woman's husband dies after his service, as a result of injuries sustained in battle? What if a traumatised soldier dies of suicide?

The War Widows' Quilt is not only a work of art, it's also an addition to a largely untold history.

Every year, we commemorate those who have fought and fallen in service for their country. Still, we know little about the widows left behind. They are not commemorated as heroes. We do not talk about their fights and struggles.

If we hear about war widows in the news at all, it's usually women who lost their husbands as a result of heroic battles. But we must not forget that war claims victims in all kinds of ways, and over long periods of time. And we must not forget that war widows' stories are worthy of our attention in their own right.

Who is a war widow? This may seem an unnecessary question, but who is classed as a war widow in the eyes of the government has changed considerably over the years. We usually imagine their husbands died on a battlefield. But what if a woman's husband dies after his service, as a result of injuries sustained in battle? What if a traumatised soldier commits suicide? How does the law consider civil partnerships?

Perhaps the most telling definitions of war widowhood can be found in the documents that dictate who is eligible for war widows' pensions and benefits. In the Victorian period, the British forces gave inconsistent, insufficient help for war widows. In 1830, to be eligible for any support from the army, a widow's husband had to have held at least the rank of officer, and served for ten or more years on full pay, or been killed in action.

A Short History

With the First World War came the first nationally administered war widows' pension. Yet, payments were far too little to cover living costs. Conditions for war widows worsened during the Second World War, when their pension was taxed at the highest possible rate of 50%. As Thomas Williams put it in the House of Commons in 1939: "The government are prepared to feed these people on honour and not bread."

In 1971, Laura Connolly, a British war widow who had lived in Australia, where her pension was tax-free, called on women in Britain to take action. They listened, and they organised, and soon the War Widows' Association of Great Britain (WWA) was founded. After incessant campaigning by the WWA, the tax on War Widow's Pension was reduced to 25% in 1976, and lifted completely in 1979.

Until November 2014, some widows and widowers who had lost their spouse in military service between 1973 and 2005 stopped receiving survivor's pension if they remarried, formed a civil partnership, or cohabited. By getting the government to address this issue, the WWA achieved its aim of parity of pensions for all war widows almost exactly a century after War Widows' Pension had first been introduced. Yet, to this day a number of women have yet to have their pension reinstated, and the Association continues to fight on their behalf.

arthur+martha

Philip Davenport

Director

Lois Blackburn

Director

*"This project has inspired me, surprised me, moved me to tears.
The quilt will bring comfort to anyone who has experienced grief.
It is about all of us."*

Lois Blackburn

"You bind us together. Forever."

Deanna Selby

Since 2009, five arthur+martha history quilts have been made. They are collaborations with people who often go unnoticed — especially people with experience of homelessness, and older people. In 2018, a quilt collaboration began with the War Widows' Stories project.

Workshops were held up and down the country, in people's own homes, at lunch and afternoon tea meetings and in dedicated groups. Mail art allowed further people to join in.

The War Widows' Quilt touches on universal human themes of loss, sacrifice, and love. It refers to many wars and war zones, including the Second World War, Korea, Northern Ireland, the Falklands, Iraq.

It's another kind of military history, repurposing uniforms to make a soft statement, in contrast to the hard surfaces of weapons and armour. It communicates some very harsh realities in a form associated with femininity, comfort, safety.

Art allows us to frame experience in a new way, to understand, share, and move on. It distracts from distress, bringing release.

arthur+martha

The quilting and poetry together are a powerful tool for self-expression. They link to the language-based work of artists like Jenny Holzer, Ian Hamilton-Finlay, Tracy Emin.

Artist Lois Blackburn led the quilting, a technique she's used previously with with people who have experienced trauma. It brings comfort, it's slow, calming, and rewards the senses. Lois supported the makers according to their needs, giving encouragement and technical advice, sometimes stitching on people's behalf. The overall composition and 'making up' of the quilt was created by Lois, in consultation with participants and the project team.

Poetry activities, led by Philip Davenport, helped people to find new ways of saying. Philip suggested some poetic forms, which people responded to. He also jotted down conversations, ideas, memories, as a scribe for the group. These notes were then passed back to people, or sometimes collaged together by Philip into group poems, using only the words spoken by the widows. Many of the patches contain lines from poems.

Listening to untold stories is a way of widening our history and our understanding. The war widows' stories are not only war stories. They are about grief and how we all survive. Telling these stories brings us closer to ourselves.

"Like other unheard histories, the war widows bring insight and understanding when the official narrative has failed. These words, these stitches, tell stories that are almost unbearably sad. Yet they're also uplifting, because ultimately they are stories of survival."

Philip Davenport

Participants

Anon	Gillian Gibson	Jenny Oates
Anon	Jenny Green	Wendy Parker
Rita Armin	Tracey Green	Sylvia Ann Elliott Plowman
Susan Amyes	Annabelle Griffiths	
	Gill Grigg	Sue Raw
Bernice Bartlett		Ann Rickwood
Phyllis Bell	Lauran Hamilton	Mabel Rolston
Joan Bloomer	Elaine Hanby	Antoinette Rutherford
Marjorie Bourne	Raqual Harper-Titchener	
Brenda Boyd	Paul Harris	Ada Jean Scalan
	Lynn Frances Heaney	Deanna Selby
Kathleen Cahillane	Diane Hill	Irene Shiels
Liz Carter	Brenda Hillman	Violet Elizabeth Simpson
Kathleen Cockcroft	Helen Hudson	Maureen Skapars
Joy Cousins	Sulvia Humphries	Stephanie Smeaton
Teresa Davidson	Wendy Hutchinson	Sue Stout
Katherine Deans		Dorothy Symonds
	Margaret Irvine	
Shirley Dodd Clark	Maureen Jarvis	Edna Taylor
Lorna Donaldson	Angela Jones	Patricia Taylor
Movita Durber	Jo Jukes	Vera Taylor
Chris Dziuba		Kate Thomas
	Moira Kane	Margaret Twynham
Joan Eggmore		
Angela Evans	Lynne Lightfoot	Susan Walker
		Kerry Webster
Kathleen Finlay	Claire Mackay	Frances Wheeler
Linda Fisher	Jan (Molly) Mawhood	Lydia White
Janet Fookes	Margaret McElveen	Bernice Williams
Margaret Fragell	Alberta McMenemy	Irene Wills
Pam Frost	Pearl Moran	Betty Withers
	Mary Moreland	Pauline Worden Kelly
Violet A Gault	Romana Morton	
Wendy Gibson		



Acknowledgements

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We are immensely grateful to the project's partners and their enthusiasm and investment in our shared aim to raise awareness of war widows past and present. Royal Museums Greenwich have generously supported our events and hosted the first exhibition of the War Widows' Quilt. The National Memorial Arboretum hosted one of our arts workshops.

We are especially indebted to the War Widows' Association of Great Britain (WWA) for their continuing partnership and their incredible support and enthusiasm for this project. In particular, we thank Debbie Bowles for first making contact with us and recognising that we had a shared goal; WWA Chair Mary Moreland for tirelessly pursuing her – and our – aims and giving so much time, thought, and energy to this project, including her own story; all the WWA Trustees for their encouragement and collaboration; the WWA Regional Organisers for ensuring their members got to tell their stories; and to all members of the Association who welcomed us at their events and gatherings with open hearts, full plates and glasses, and, of course, so many stories. Without Dr Ailbhe McDaid (University College Cork), the War Widows' Stories project would have struggled to survive its infancy. Ailbhe's intellectual rigour, experience, humour, and warmth endeared her to everyone she encountered in the course of her work with us and made her indispensable to the development of the ideas which led to the work documented in this book.

Acknowledgements

Christinna Hazzard (LJMU) and Dr Melanie Bassett (University of Portsmouth) capably followed in Ailbhe's footsteps. Among many other duties, Mel conducted dozens of oral history interviews, travelling to all corners of the country, including three "grand tours" of Scotland. Christinna, ever capable and organised has been at the logistical and administrative heart of the project almost since its beginnings, looking after us and our participants at events and from a distance.

Finally, and most importantly, this project would have been impossible without the participation of the women whose lives and experiences lie at its heart. To you, we say a heartfelt thank you. Thank you for sharing your stories with us, for being brave in many, many different ways, for being both critical and open, and for inspiring us. We hope this book and this project bring you one step closer to feeling heard, seen, and acknowledged.

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