



War Widows' Stories

History. Memories. Heritage.

An Interview with Christina Claypole

25 June 2017

Conducted by Nadine Muller



The War Widows'
Association
of Great Britain

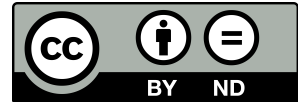


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To do so, and for any other questions about this interview, how you may use it, or about the project, please contact Dr Nadine Muller via email (info@warwidowsstories.org.uk), or by post at the following addressing: John Foster Building, Liverpool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

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

I = Interviewer

R = Respondent / Interviewee

[] = Clarification note

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

R: Christina Claypole.

I: And what is your age, Chris?

R: I'm 76.

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

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

I: Evacuees?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

R: Yes.

I: Before she had you.

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

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

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

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

I: Can you tell us a bit about that?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Anyway, we did meet Gus and Mack.¹ Gus had got out through the torpedo tubes in Malta.² It was torpedoed in Malta Harbour in Valetta on April 1st 1942. And apparently there was a carrier called The Lance and that's what they were after, but they took the submarine as well, and another submarine. They got all three of them in the harbour that day. Gus actually got out through the torpedo tubes while it was sinking.³ Amazing. Absolutely amazing. I think one guy got off and they never saw him again, and they were all hiding under lorries, and when they looked they were full of ammunition. It was dreadful. So we found a lot from that, and I've actually got a letter from Mack to say that he wrote down his account, and it tells you all about that day in Malta.

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

¹ Respondent correction: Jack (not Gus).

² Respondent correction: Jack (not Gus).

³ Respondent correction: Jack (not Gus).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

R: [Laughter].

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

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

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

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

R: Oh yes, yes. It was an Old English Sheepdog, and one of my hobbies was getting baby clothes, putting them on the dog, and wheeling it round the village as my baby. It was wonderful, the dog. He used to follow us to school, and he used to jump on the bus, get

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I: So that's regional organiser.

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

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

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

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

R: Yes.

I: – as well, to socialise with.

R: Yes.

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

R: No, never.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But it must have been a very sad time for her, and for all the ladies. I mean, you can't imagine how many we're talking compared with how many we're talking from Afghanistan and Iraq and Ireland, and ... There's no comparison in the numbers and that's why they were left behind. That's why there were just too many to do anything for.

I mean, luckily, they've come good and given them a decent pension. Thank you, Margaret Thatcher, for that.

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

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

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

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

I: Did you join in with the baking?

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

I: But the eating is important.

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

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

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

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

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