



# War Widows' Stories

History. Memories. Heritage.

## An Interview with Mary Moreland

23 June 2017

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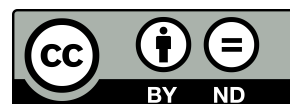
Conducted by Ailbhe McDaid



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](mailto: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

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**I = Interviewer**

**R = Respondent / Interviewee**

**[ ] = Clarification note**

**I: So it's Friday the 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2017, conducting an interview for the War Widows' Stories project with Mary Moreland in the company of Ailbhe McDaid. So, for the record, can you state your name, please?**

**R:** Mary Moreland.

**I: Your place of birth?**

**R:** Kilkeel.

**I: That's great. Thanks, Mary. So, we might begin by asking you to tell us about your life right now, at the moment.**

**R:** Well, at the moment, it's very busy. On the 8th April, I was elected or nominated to be the Chairman of the War Widows' Association. I retired on the 31<sup>st</sup> from the Civil Service, 31<sup>st</sup> March this year, to take up the role as Chairman. It has been very, very hectic, very busy taking over. You think you know what's happening, but you really don't. It's one of those things that you have meetings here, meetings there, meetings everywhere, and it's trying to link up and coordinate travel. Probably it's easier for me to travel from Northern Ireland across than it was for the last Chairman or for other people in different parts of the UK. I'm also involved at home in Northern Ireland with the Commission for Victims and Survivors Forum, which is basically focused on victims and survivors of the Troubles. That's a very new role. It's a very different role to what I'm doing, both voluntary roles. Also at home, I'm a member of the Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee, and that's again focused on veterans, but much more on veterans, while war widows are part of the veterans' community, the Veterans Advisory Pensions Committee is very much focused on the veteran, serving soldier, that has become a veteran after leaving.

**I: So you have plenty on your plate.**

**R:** Quite a lot on my plate.

**I: So, maybe we'll go back to your childhood and early life. Can you tell me where you were born, and about your family?**

R: It's very normal. Born in Kilkeel, grew up in Kilkeel. I grew up in Kilkeel. I'm the baby, two older sisters, Mum, Dad. There is quite a gap between my oldest sister, who is now a rector in Belfast, and my middle sister and myself because my mum had TB [Tuberculosis], so there was a little gap there when she was very ill. Very, very normal childhood. Very happy childhood, I don't remember anything dramatic. Well I suppose, I was about six I suppose, when my mum and dad had an accident. They had been on a scooter, and they had an accident. Basically, we were shipped off to aunts to live with them for the length of time. At that stage, you didn't realise how bad the accident was because you were young. It was an era when people probably protected children. You weren't told of things, so we stayed with aunts and that.

But no, it was a very normal childhood. We went to the local school, local primary school, local high school, all on the same campus, played hockey for the school. Probably much more interested in sports than I was in academia, and very, very, very happy, from what I remember.

**I: Did you go on to further education after school or into training?**

R: No, I left school after O Level with one O Level in Biology, which was very much use, not! Basically, no. I left school and went into the Civil Service. I didn't go on to further education. That came later. Then at that stage, I met my husband and had a family and went through that, but no, it was just get out, get to work. That was me more than my parents. I think they would have encouraged me to go on to education.

**I: Did you meet your husband soon after you left school?**

R: It was a bit strange because obviously you have friends at school, and one of my best girlfriends, she was going out with this chap, and he had a friend, so it was, I suppose, a blind date, really. We went out and we hit it off, and we just took it from there. I suppose, being young, you're ... I was going to say naïve. Well, I suppose naïve might be the word. I don't regret any of it. Looking back, I don't regret any of it, but you may have done things differently, but then you don't know these things at that time. So yes, we met, and then we married and we had the children.

**I: Did you stay in the same town or nearby?**

R: Well, John lived in Clough at the time, so we married in Kilkeel and then we went to live in Clough, which is nineteen miles, twenty miles from Kilkeel. Still a very small village community. Kilkeel is probably a fishing town, Clough a very small village. That's where the children grew up and went to school, and that's where he lived and we lived. Life just went on as normal.

**I: You mentioned you had some children.**

R: Yes, two. A girl and a boy. They went to the local primary school and then, from there, on to high schools and ended up eventually going to the same high school that I went to.

**I: Your husband, John, was he a member of the Army?**

R: Well, he had been for some time. He'd been a member of the Territorial Army and then the Ulster Defence Regiment on and off, alternating between the two. But, basically, he worked for the ... I can't remember the name now, it's not coming to me ... but a coal merchant. Times changed, and they were, I suppose, rationalising, as businesses do. So, he had the opportunity of buying into the business, buying his own business, or

buying his section of the business off. So he bought the business, and he ended up being a coal merchant and continued delivering to the people he delivered to.

He also then was part-time in the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR). I also served from about '84 to '87. I did about three years, so I knew a lot of the makeup of the Ulster Defence Regiment in Third County Down Battalion. So it was very much you do your day job, and then you go down, and you go out on a patrol at night because of the circumstances, obviously, in Northern Ireland at that time. You were contributing to the community in both ways. You were serving them during the day and serving them at night.

**I: Was that a common thing for people to be part-time members of the army?**

R: Very much so, in certain communities. There would have been a few that lived in the same vicinity where we lived and in other places, so it would have been very tight. Because of the situation in Northern Ireland at that stage, you tended to socialise with people that you worked with, so the social aspect of our life was really around the Ulster Defence Regiment and the chaps that served. It was very much within that community.

**I: So you were still working in the Civil Service at this time, or were you at home with the children?**

R: No. I had given up, looking after the children. Fortunately, I was able to look after the children, give up work, and look after the children. I did a few different things as the children grew up and went to school. I worked in the local petrol station for a while. I actually was working when John was killed. I was working in the local primary school, where my son was still attending, helping in the kitchen. My mother-in-law was the caretaker of the primary school, so when she wasn't able to do that, you would have helped out, or when the other lady, Mrs Mills, wasn't able to do her job, you would have helped out. So it was very much a local community, a local school. It's very much changed now.

I've been down there recently, and it looks like a fantastic big school now. But it was very much part of the community. Because the Ballykilner camp where we served was about three and a half miles away, there were a lot of children from the camp. Usually officers' children would have come when they were here for their two-year term or whatever, two-year post thing, they would have gone to the school. So my son and daughter, they got very friendly with a lot of the children from army backgrounds.

**I: So there was quite a military community there?**

R: There would have been quite a military community in the sense that I suppose it was a safe community for them to be out, if anything in Northern Ireland at that stage was safe.

**I: So you mentioned there that you were working the day that your husband was killed. Would you be able to tell me a little bit about that day and the circumstances of his death?**

R: If you go back to the situation in Northern Ireland at that stage, you lived with this ... Because we were both in the Ulster Defence Regiment, and because I had left at that stage, and because John was still in the UDR, you'd lived with it for quite a while. The children had lived with it. I mean my father commented about [my children] having to look under the car. It was just a natural thing that you did. So you did these things, and you lived with it. You checked under your car, you were always aware of what was happening. It was a Friday morning, and the children were breaking up from school that

day. It was nine days before Christmas, so they were breaking up for their Christmas holidays. John had left that morning, about 7:30AM, as he would have done just to go on his rounds. I had got the children prepared. [My daughter] went off to her school, to high school. She was in Castlewellan at that stage. I'd left [my son] to the primary school.

I had gone. I was working in the kitchen. I was preparing lunch, and it must have been about 10:30AMish you're talking, and the headmistress of the school came 'round to the kitchen door. If you picture the scene: I'm there in my overalls and rubber gloves, probably peeling potatoes or something, up to my elbows in whatever it was, preparing the lunch for the children. The headmistress came to the door and said, "Mary, could you come with me?" It's funny, I would normally be the sort of person who would [think], "Oh, I'm in trouble now," sort of thing, but there was something that day in her manner that I thought, "This is a bit unusual". So I took my gloves off and went to the door with her and walked round the outside of the school. As I walked round, I don't actually recall noticing the police car, but it must have been sitting there because we walked round and I just said to her and her manner, I said something about, "Is it Daddy?" because I mean Daddy at that stage would have been mid-70s probably.

So, it was like, "Is it Daddy?" because my mum had died previously. She said, "No". I remember turning the corner of the school and seeing two policemen, and they must have been twelve, if they were a day. I mean they seemed to be extremely young. When I saw them, you instantly knew because you'd lived with this threat forever. Well, it seemed forever. We knew John was high risk. He would have been high risk for the IRA. I remember saying to the policeman, "Where did they get him?" I think the policeman was taken aback that I instantly knew. I remember asking, "Is he dead?", but I don't think I had any doubt at that stage. My understanding was the incident happened about 10:25AM. I mean in hindsight, it's amazing that within five minutes, five to ten minutes, they were there to tell me, which I just think was fantastic. I felt so sorry for the young policemen. It must have been awful for them to come and tell.

Then I remember being taken into the staff room in the school and sitting there. I thought I was probably very coherent. Hindsight, I probably wasn't, but at the time I thought I was thinking very clearly. I remember the secretary making tea. It's funny the little things that you remember because I said, "No, could I have a cup of coffee?" because I don't drink tea. I think they were like, "No, tea for shock". I'm like, "No, I like coffee". So I had my cup of coffee and, in the meantime, obviously, people had tried to get the minister, my local minister, but they couldn't get him, so they got the other local minister. There was a Presbyterian church and a non-subscribing Presbyterian church, so the Presbyterian minister, I think, had arrived.

I remember saying, "No," because Santa Claus was in the school at that stage, this was the last day, and Santa Claus was in the school, it was very much, "No, I can't tell [my son] until he has seen Santa Claus". So, I think very quickly they had changed it 'round from the junior school, P1s, to the P6s – I think he was in P6 at that stage – to let them have Santa Claus first, so he got to see Santa Claus. Then of course they brought him to me, and I explained to him what had happened, as best I knew at that stage. I mean how do you tell a child that their father has been murdered? How do you explain that to a child when you're ... But he was very good. I mean that is probably the most difficult thing I've ever had to do in my life.

Then I had to get from Clough, obviously, to Castlewellan to tell my daughter because, living in a small village, and this came to light very quickly, that if the police hadn't arrived as quickly as they arrived to tell me, I would have been in the kitchen because one of the other girls that worked in the kitchen was on her way down because she'd already heard. They talk about bad news travelling fast. It's quite right. So, she could have

actually walked into the kitchen before I'd even known, and I would have been told in a different way. I think that would have been very, very difficult that somebody else knew before me. I think, obviously, I mean these things happen, but at that stage, when you're in shock, because that's exactly what happened when I went to tell my daughter. The Presbyterian minister took me to Castlewellan because obviously they wouldn't let me drive. She was brought into the headmaster's office at that stage, which probably is not the best thing for a child to be ... "Would you come to the headmaster's office?" It's always this thing, "Well what have I done wrong?" I mean she was very much, "What's he doing there?" This was her brother. Then you explain it again, and you tell your daughter what has happened. For a long time after it, she had difficulty coming to terms with the fact that her brother, who was younger than her, was told first. I mean, it's totally, totally natural that because she's the oldest, she would have expected to be told. It's only as she's growing up and you explain things, when you're able to rationalise these things out, that you can understand that you have to do what you have to do at the time.

So, while I was talking to the police and stuff, they were talking about, "Who do you want told? Is there anybody that needs to be told?" because obviously at that stage the press are going to get it, so you're trying to think of all these people that you need to tell. You go, your own parents, and then John's parents, and my family. He was from quite a large family, six or seven brothers and sisters, one brother and loads of sisters. So it was making sure that they all knew before the press got hold of it. But the press being the press, I think they announced that somebody had been killed in Downpatrick, a coal merchant had been killed. Well, being a small community in Northern Ireland and being round that community, it didn't take much working out. So yes, I mean it was a whirlwind, but I think because I had served myself, I knew the risks. I knew there was a very high risk that we would have been targeted. John and I had spoken often about it and what would happen in circumstances and what we would do. I don't know whether that prepared me more, or I understood more, but you go through a period at that stage where it's ...

I'm just thinking back, and I'm jumping about a bit here, but because it was the last day of school, and they were having a week or a fortnight's holidays over Christmas, you left the house in the morning thinking, "Well, that will do until I come home because I'm not going to be working". So all I could think about as well was, "The house is in such a state". Because Northern Ireland is very much a wake, you have the wake where people come. Even though the house was private, you still have people coming and visiting and passing on their sympathies. To a certain extent, I think that does help, that people care. You very quickly know the genuine people that care and the ones that are just coming to nosey. So all I could think of was the fire wasn't cleaned out, the house wasn't clean, but my sisters were absolutely fantastic. My middle sister, I mean she can clean like there's nobody's business. She's so quick and everything shines. If I do it the same way, in the same time, it never looks as nice. She was fantastic. Obviously, with people coming, you want the best china out, so that probably hasn't been out since last Christmas, so it all has to be washed and all the rest of it. My neighbour two doors over was round and she was sorting the fire out. Again, it's funny the little things at that time that stick in your mind. She had found coal because obviously John was a coal merchant, there was coal about our house. We stored coal in the garage and stuff but she'd chosen the wrong coal to light the fire so the fire wouldn't light and she couldn't work out why the fire wouldn't light but it was the wrong coal she'd put on. It was smokeless for a closed fire and ours was an open fire. So, it's little things like that that stick in your mind.

Well, when I eventually got back home, the UDR welfare arrive. They were second to none. They were absolutely amazing because you're talking in a very short space of time that you've told your children, then you end up back in your own house. I'm not sure how you would describe it but it's just all this coming in, and decisions have to be made. The

UDR welfare, as I said, they were absolutely amazing. They knew there had to be a funeral organised and that was probably the last thing on my mind but I knew very quickly I wanted it to be a military funeral. That took a weight off my mind because then they organised it all. The chaps, his colleagues, our colleagues from the UDR, they would have been involved, there would be pipers. It was very well-organised.

You were kept informed of what was going on. Obviously, there was all the other practicalities of post mortems and things, but the UDR were very, very good at keeping you informed, but keeping you protected at the same time. I made a decision that because John had been killed outside the home ... It's little things that go through your mind, "Thank goodness it wasn't the following Friday because the children would have been with him in the lorry when it had happened". "Thank goodness it happened away from the home because the children would always have remembered," or "They could have seen". It would have been much more difficult. It's difficult enough. There are little things that you look at. I mean my family were so, so supportive. I didn't have to think of anything. All I had to do was just be there, be myself and be there for the children. The decorations were up, the Christmas tree was in the corner. It's a bit surreal when you think about it. You have a Christmas tree in the corner, and you're organising a funeral.

Practically, the Ulster Defence Regiment were fantastic because if you look at the wakes in Northern Ireland, they're very much tea and buns, and tea and sandwiches, and tea and biscuits. So, the UDR were very practical, and they handed my sister some funds so she could go and buy milk, sugar, whatever else was needed because all these people were coming. It was a strange day, yes. It was very, very strange. Thinking back now, there's only certain things that you can remember of that day and certain things that stand out, very, very clear in your mind. That was the Friday, but over the next couple of days, it was different. The funeral then was the Sunday. While it's very quick, that's standard in Northern Ireland, and I think possibly allows for the grieving process to begin very quickly. Because, as I say, John was killed outside the home, I decided rather than bring him home and have the funeral from the home, we would rest him in the funeral parlour in Downpatrick. My rationale behind that was I did not want the children to remember their father leaving the house in a coffin. I mean they were twelve and ten at the time.

At that age, while they have a certain understanding, I think the memory they should have of their father was him leaving for work, happy, looking forward to the holidays, looking forward to having them in the lorry with him as he was going about his day-to-day work. I didn't want them to have that memory of him leaving. That was the way he left. I remember people saying, "Do you want us to stay?" on the Friday night. It was very much, "Well no" because, I mean, what can you do? You have to learn to be on your own very quickly. Maybe I was too practical, but that night I remember both children sleeping with me. Well, I'm not going to say sleeping. We didn't do an awful lot of sleeping, but they were in the bed with me that night. It was a strange time. As I say, I think I was very, very with it, but looking back, I'm not sure I was. I think I was, I don't know.

**I: So you mentioned that whirlwind of support in the immediate aftermath and the wake and the funeral. Did that continue then once that immediate period of hectic was over?**

**R:** I mean during those three days, the Friday, Saturday, Sunday, it was very much, well, as you say, that whirlwind. There was the support there. I mean John's Commanding Officer from way back – he's a Brigadier now – he was passing, so he stopped into the house. There was lots of media attention, which is a bit weird. I think that's something that, I don't know how you stop it, but I didn't speak to the media at that stage, none of

my family spoke to the media at that stage. It's an intrusion that you could do without because it's not reporting the facts. It's that salaciousness of the grieving widow. So, I was insistent that, at the funeral, that the media ... I couldn't do anything on the public roads, but they weren't going to get into the funeral or at the grave side. The funeral was a horrible day. They had two sets of bagpipes because one kept getting wet. They had to stop and then change over to another one, the lone piper.

Our colleagues did a fantastic job. and the crowds were just out of this world. Again, silly things that happened on that day. I mean I got into the car that was taking us from the house to the church, behind the coffin, and I must have knocked a switch or something. The radio went on and it was like, "Turn that off", but I had turned it on. I don't know how I had turned it on, but eventually it was turned off. That's not what you wanted. You wanted silence. But yes, after the funeral there was the usual. It was very surreal. I remember my son coming back from the funeral and people being in the house. The first thing he did, he walked across and he turned on the Christmas tree lights. To some people, that was like, "You can't have Christmas tree lights on. You're grieving". You've got to make it as normal as possible for the children. If he wants the Christmas tree light on, he can have the Christmas tree lights on.

So, the support was absolutely fantastic. John's colleagues, on the Christmas morning, arrived. They'd been out obviously on patrol. One of the larger chaps had dressed up as Santa Claus, and they arrived in two Land Rovers. Now, I'm not sure Santa Claus has ever arrived in a Land Rover, but they arrived, and together they had got the children a computer, a games computer. If you think, this was 1988. Computers were relatively new, and games computers were relatively new at that stage. They came in, and Santa Claus gave them this computer, and they set it up. So they gave the magic to Christmas that time. My family, my dad and my two sisters, they would have usually had Christmas in a local hotel, while we would have had a family Christmas with the four of us and then we would have got together later, but we joined with them in the local hotel in Newcastle, which was lovely because the hotel had another three people to do Christmas dinner for and they had very little notice. I know for a big hotel that's not a big deal, but the fact that you were doing it and you were with family was very good. But then the following year you did have that contact. You were invited to things down in Ballykilner with John's colleagues and stuff. They were immensely ... They still are immensely good. But as time moves on, you tend to need some people, and I probably tended to need less support, although in thinking about it, the first year was brilliant. Brilliant, that's the wrong word. If you can understand what I mean. Brilliant is not what I mean, but it was very good and the support was very good. Again, the UDR welfare stepped up to the mark and were exceptional throughout that year and would have organised things for ourselves and the children. You were involved in quite a lot.

But what I tend to say to people is the second year is the most difficult year because you've had your first Christmas, you've had your first birthday, you've had your first wedding anniversary, you've had all these firsts without your husband being there so people assume that you're okay in the second year. But the problem is, the second year you're having the birthdays, the anniversaries, and you're not having the same support from people. You had all this support in the first year, and then the second year you're doing it on your own, so it's much more difficult the second year. I think, when I look back now, shortly after the second anniversary I ended up taking ill. I think that was very much you've gone on, you've continued to do what you do. I mean, I had gone back to work in the school. You do all this in the same community, and I'd taken ill. In fact, I couldn't sit down for a while because it was boils. Not very pleasant, but that was very much your body saying, "Right, you've gone far enough. Now stop. You need a rest and a break". I think at that stage you start to re-evaluate what your life is because, as you say, you have gone on and continued.

Then I needed to do something, I suppose, for myself, and not take away from remembering John, but I needed to focus a bit more on myself and what I would do. So I'd left the primary school. I left the job I was doing because, at this stage, Castlewellan School had closed, so both children were going to Kilkeel High School. That was very much leave them to the bus in the morning quite early. I joined a gym. When I dropped them off, I would go to the gym, do the exercise, and come back, but I needed something more. So, I ended up working for a local coach works firm, really as the boss's PA. That was interesting because it was totally different. It was totally out of my comfort zone. You learned how to assess a car's damage when it came in for body work damage or it had been in an accident. You would have had to go somewhere, and you would have just jumped in any car and driven any car. So it was quite an experience.

At that stage, then, I noticed that the Civil Service were looking for civil servant staff. There was an opportunity to be reinstated. I applied and, fortunately, was accepted. I was reinstated into the Civil Service, that would have been '91, so that's, what, three years after John was killed. In one way, that was refreshing. Frightening, but refreshing in that you became your own person because you were working with people who didn't know your circumstances. It was my choice whether I told them my circumstances or not. Therefore, because the assumption, obviously, if you don't have a husband and you have two children, you're either divorced or a single parent because people don't instantly think widow.

As I say, it was refreshing to be in a work environment where people just accepted you as Mary, and not as John's widow or [my son's] mum or [my daughter's] mum. You were just Mary. So, in a way, I think that was a good move to do that. Not that you want to reject the community that was so supportive around you, and that's not what you were doing, but it could have become very easy to just stay not doing anything for me. I think it was a healthier relationship with the children, the fact that I was me, I wasn't any longer their daddy's widow. So I was a person in my own right again. From that, then, the Civil Service that I went through, I got promoted. There was a moratorium for a while, so you weren't able to progress, but any promotion board I went on I managed to be successful. They had a very good programme of further education and assistance to study.

At that stage, then, I went and did my Business Studies degree, and I did my Master's in Counselling and Therapeutic Communication. My manager at the time wanted me to do a Master's in Public Administration, but I couldn't think of anything more boring. I had to come up very quickly with another one that used transferable skills. I mean, counselling and therapeutic communication has very transferable skills and knowledge to management and senior management. From that I've always had the bug to do something different and not be afraid of change. CIPD [Chartered Institute of Personnel Development] and personal development and various other elements where you take the opportunities when you can. As I went through my career in the Civil Service, I became a mentor. I first of all did their mentoring programme as a mentee and found that extremely useful for myself, to see the thinking behind a lot of things that went on in the strategy. I then became a mentor myself and had mentored a number of staff in the Civil Service, with positive outcomes.

I became an NVQ [National Vocational Qualifications] assessor and internal verifier and actually ran the NVQ programme in the department. So it was very much being proactive and doing things, and that's where I've ended up today because as your children grow and grow up, their dependence on you ... I was going to say lessens. I'm not sure it ever lessens. You're always the bank. You're always the transport. You're always the first point of contact. When they phone you, the first question you ask is, "What do you want?" and usually the answer is, "Nothing", but you assume because they're phoning you they want something. But yes, as they grow and become more independent, you find you

have more time on your hands. If anything, this is a bit of a cliché, but giving back and giving helps. I think it helps me to understand. The way I look at it is, it's my legacy. Me being positive, me being proactive, me being out there and contributing to society is my legacy to John.

**I: So it sounds like you had wonderful support from your community and from your family. I wonder, could you talk a little bit about governmental support or support from charities or anything else that you might have availed of?**

R: At that stage, I suppose the support that I got from the community, from my family, especially my family, and especially from the Ulster Defence Regiment, the welfare. At that stage, I didn't go to look for support from charities. I didn't join the War Widows' Association for a number of years. I think when you're first bereaved, well the way I was, the military are very good at giving you a lot of information. Now, in my case, I had the UDR welfare to walk me through the information that you had and also the welfare service, which is now linked to Veterans UK, but the Veterans Welfare Service was very good. They had a gentleman who came out – Ivan. He was a lovely, lovely gentleman, so, so nice and so considerate. But because it was that sort of military UDR family background, they were there to help me fill forms in because there's a lot of stuff that has to happen. I don't get a death certificate until there's an inquest, and things like that.

They were there to do all that, so that was really the support I needed, so I wasn't looking for outside support. Charities, it's very much something we find in the War Widows' Association, because of data protection, we can't contact people. You have to contact the charities. I suppose I was very much an independent person where you do it yourself. You get on. You don't necessarily ask for help. You just get on with it. So, I didn't get involved in that sort of charity work until, as I say, later on, until I started to have a bit more time and giving back. You're so, I suppose, engrossed in bringing two children up. I mean the practicalities of that. I mean, if there had been two boys, that would have been great, and two girls, that would have been great. Not that I'm saying it's not great that they're one of each, but it was like one needed to go to the Girls' Brigade, one needed to go to the BB [Boys' Brigade], but they needed to be there at the same time. They weren't in the same place, so how do you split yourself? So, it's the practicalities of all that.

That's where the family support comes in. I'm not sure charitable support would help in things like that, but practicalities, the practical support, came from the Ulster Defence Regiment, the welfare, and the Veterans Welfare Service. That was fantastic. That's what you needed at that time. Again, I mean after the day John was killed, they arrested a couple of people for his murder because obviously there was the whole search and whatever went on. The police were, at that stage, the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary), they were fantastic because you were kept informed the whole time of what was going. It took a while for it to come to court. I could be wrong in the timings of this, but it was maybe a couple of years before it came to court. The police were extremely good at briefing me and what was going on during the court case. I do remember I had organised a trip with my eldest sister and the two children to go to London, but the court case had started so I couldn't go. She took the children for a break.

But the police were very, very good at making sure that I was able to get into court without having to run the gauntlet of all the media and the press. So, I was cosseted from that. I didn't have to deal with that. I was able to sit with them as opposed to in the public gallery. So you were away from the public. The prosecuting barrister at that stage was so, so good in that when he knew I was in court, he took me up to his chambers and explained what was going on, and all the rest of it. So there was all that support, which I don't know whether it's given to everybody or not. I can only speak from my experience,

but I think things like that, people treating you like an adult. I mean, yes, you can be protected from the worst, but I think the honesty and openness is something that you appreciate. After John was killed, I remember saying that I would like to go and see the route that the killers had taken, just to walk myself through what had happened. Now, whether that was because I had served and I had understood, or not, I don't know. But I think the more information you have, the more you can deal with things. The police were extremely good at doing that and explaining what had happened, the whole process. Whether that made recovery or acceptance better, I don't know, but I think it helped me.

**I: It sounds like, in a lot of ways, your grief had to be quite public then because there was obviously a lot of aftermath, and the court case, and the high profile of John being killed during the Troubles. Do you think that was particularly difficult?**

R: Being a very private person, yes, it was very difficult. It's something you have to accept. Again, I suppose you manage the media, to a certain extent, by not talking to them. They got my name wrong in it. But yes, it is an added element to grief because you're always aware that if you walk outside at that stage ... I mean in the immediate aftermath, there would have been cameras everywhere. I know there were people ... my mother-in-law lived very close to where we lived, and I know the media was out there, and I know the media were talking to neighbours. They were trying to find that. I know they were there the day of the funeral, outside the church, outside the house. Again, the police were very good in the sense that I'd said, "No, I don't want them into the graveyard". Again, it was very much saying, "No, while I think I'm coping, I'm definitely not in the right mind to speak to the media", and that's not the image you want to portray. But you can't stop it. I mean there was interest there.

Again, I remember during the wake actually saying at one point, there was one particular politician that I definitely didn't want anywhere near the funeral because ... I mean with the best will in the world, somebody getting murdered in the Troubles nine days before Christmas is a story. Politicians, being politicians, will use it. I can clearly remember the people sitting in the house at the time, and they would have had a direct line to this politician, and I remember saying, "I don't want him anywhere near the house, and I don't want him anywhere near the funeral. If he does, I will ask the police to remove him". Needless to say, he didn't turn up because that would not have been a good look. But it was very much: I know this is a public event, but it has to be private for the children, and the children have to be protected. The whole way through it, I mean, that was your focus. The children. And they have to live with it a lot longer than I do, God willing.

But they don't want, in twenty years' time, to look back at pictures that they had no control over. They have to grow up with it. Their school mates, their friends, their future friends have to grow up with it. You want to protect them as best you can. So, I didn't [speak to the media], and none of my family spoke to the media at that point. As I recall, I don't think any of John's family spoke to the media either. I know some of the neighbours did, but you have no control over that. So yes, it makes it extremely difficult because you're trying to deal with your own grief, deal with your children's grief. At the same time, you want it to be known that it's difficult and you want it kept private, but everybody wants a piece of you. The media does. It wasn't until 2008, I think, the Operation Banner, when they had the service in St Paul's Cathedral, that I actually did any media and spoke to the media.

But at that stage, then, I was becoming more involved in various things. You accept it's public, and you accept there's a public curiosity, but at the same time, I think the public have to accept that, if you have two children, that's where your focus should be, on the children and their grief and protecting them from that public frenzy.

**I: So your children were twelve and ten when John was killed. How did the rest of their childhood progress in terms of managing their grief?**

R: You would need to ask them, but I hope that it was a pretty normal childhood. You probably overcompensated to a certain extent because they didn't have their father and the father figure, but we went on holidays. We did the normal things. You tried to make it as normal as possible. You allowed them to talk when they wanted to talk, but you didn't dwell on it. It was very much led by them, if they wanted to talk about their dad. I think both of them appear to have turned out relatively normal. My son went into the RAF [Royal Airforce] for a number of years. I mean, looking back, you would have probably done things differently. I think you wouldn't be being honest with yourself if you said you wouldn't, but hopefully, if you spoke to them, they would say it was a relatively normal childhood, as normal as it could be. As I say, they appear to have grown up into reasonably well-rounded adults, but then I'm biased, aren't I? I'm their mother.

**I: So, did your social circle change, then? You mentioned that you went back to work, and you went back to education, so it sounds like your social circle changed quite a bit. Did you have contact with any other bereaved families or widows around that time?**

R: Yes. I think your social circle changes. I mean you don't tend to have the same friends now that you have in primary school or in high school, so as you grow your social circle changes. The aftercare service, the Ulster Defence Regiment, the welfare service, was very, very good at bringing together bereaved families and widows and children. I think, especially in Ballykilner and Third County Down Battalion, very quickly realised that there was a number of young – I mean I was what ... 31 ... and the children were young – and there were a number of young widows with families. So, they tended to bring them together, and widows, so you were meeting with like-minded people on a reasonably regular basis. I mean they were fantastic in that they used to have holidays in Enniskillen.

I think they realised very quickly that these children had lost their father, so while maybe you want to send the mother away on a holiday, on a respite break or whatever, for a week to Spain or wherever the holiday is, I think the welfare at that stage very quickly realised that actually the children had just lost their fathers, so the last thing that these children needed was to lose their mother for a week as well. Most people have a normal life where you're working and children have school, so it's not that easy to get away. So they very quickly worked out that, during the holidays, they would get this group of younger widows together, and they would have a holiday in Enniskillen, down in the lakes. The Welfare Officer at that stage was very much into boats and cruising and stuff and had contacts down there with the Enniskillen welfare or a Captain – I think it was a Captain, but he could have been a Major in Enniskillen – who had access to the lakes and boats and all that.

So, it was very, very good because then we could go down as a family. Other families would come down, and the children could get to play with like-minded people who had lost their fathers. So if they wanted to talk about that together, they could talk about it. The welfare service brought some of their staff down who were able to sit with the children at night. The adults could go out and have a normal adult meal, adult conversation, so it was very much focused into that, which was fantastic. I mean it was almost ahead of its time, but again, things change and times change. The UDR amalgamated with the Royal Irish, and the welfare changed. There was a transition of welfare, and a lot of that connection had stopped, and it wasn't as easy. But the transition ended up then forming, I suppose, the aftercare service, which is still there, which still is an exemplar of good practice. There is no doubt about it.

But again, as your children, as I say, become more independent, and you become more independent, you don't necessarily need all that support. I think that's probably where then I moved to the War Widows' Association. I was going to say I probably don't need the support, but it's quite nice to be able to talk. You don't actually have to explain to somebody your circumstances because you're there because of your circumstances, so you can talk as much or as little as you like. But I think it's that giving back and you progress through life to give back. I suppose, looking back, I perhaps understand that in the sense that I have gone through the Master's in the Counselling and Therapeutic Communication, so a lot of that was human growth and transition. A lot of that was very much looking at the grief process and the stages of grief.

You understand and you realise that some people stick at certain stages and other people move on, but there's no right or wrong, it's just doing what's right for yourself. As I say, I think you do. Your circumstances change and I probably would have a few friends still back in Clough. I mean you could go back and you talk to people, but I think I have much more an eclectic group of friends now from work and from different hobbies and things like that.

**I: Did you move away from Clough afterwards?**

R: I did, but not for a number of years. It was quite a while. I mean the children were up and working before I moved away. Most of that was more to do with the fact of travelling, travelling from Clough to Belfast, I mean. I worked in Stormont. So, it was the travelling, and I thought, "Well, I'll move. See if I can find a house in Bangor", because that's fifteen minutes to work and fifteen minutes back from work and stuff. I did, but I think the one thing that I worked out at that stage when I'd moved into Bangor was that I didn't actually like living in a town. I should have thought about that before I moved to Bangor. But I mean it was very built up, lots of people on top of each other. While that doesn't necessarily worry you that much because obviously people there didn't know and times had moved on anyway ... I mean, I can't say I didn't enjoy living in Bangor, but it never felt like home. Then I had an opportunity to move to Banbridge, and that's much more me. It's much more country. It's much more relaxed.

Yes, I've increased the travelling time again to work from fifteen minutes to, well 45, an hour depending on the traffic on the Westlink, which can be a nightmare, but it's that your shoulders relax as you drive home. You're going to the country. It's a summer's evening, you can sit out in the garden. I think, yes, it's much more like home. I can't ever see myself going back to live either in Kilkeel or to Clough, though. I mean, they say you never go back.

**I: Did you have any new relationships or remarry or anything ever again? So, you mentioned about becoming involved with the War Widows' Association. Would you like to tell me a little bit about how you became involved and how that role has developed?**

R: Very strange. I suppose it was through, again, the UDR welfare at that stage where there was an opportunity to go ... The president of the War Widows' [Association] at that stage was Baroness Strange, and she had a house in Perth, outside Perth Megginch Castle. She'd organised a visit for war widows. So, I think a number of war widows from Northern Ireland joined the Association at that stage and went and had a visit in the house. It was wonderful. It was a lovely day, the gardens were lovely, there was tea, biscuits, coffee, cake, all the rest of it. I suppose I came back home from that and thought, "Okay, perhaps I should join", but I didn't do an awful lot about it. I really can't remember how or when or the timings, but I remember somebody saying to me, "Are you a member of the War

Widows' Association?" I said, "Oh yes, I think I joined them a while ago, but I hadn't done anything about it".

So I went to one of their AGMs, and a couple of past chairmen and the current Chairman at that stage, who would have been Jill Grigg, "You need to join. You need to become involved. You need to become a trustee". I suppose, I'm the type of person that I don't particularly like joining things unless I'm doing something. I need to be doing something. So yes, I thought I would become a trustee, find out a bit more about it. I put my name forward for an election, probably in 2009. At that point, I wasn't elected onto the committee of trustees. But not to be dissuaded, I reapplied, and the following year I was elected on, and became their minute secretary. I think probably because it was what I was doing in work day-to-day anyway, and they needed somebody to take minutes because nobody ever likes taking minutes. So I did that. I did that for a number of years. The public relations officer, then, her time was up because you can do a stint of three years plus three years, so her stint was up. I thought, "I would quite like to do that", and I applied to do that and did that for a while and just became more involved. The Chairman changed after the three years, then it changed again. The more involved you became the more you could see the profile and the importance of an organisation like this because it's not a welfare organisation. It really is, and was founded as, a campaigning organisation. Because I had worked for government, I had an insight into how government worked, so you were able to bring certain skills and knowledge to help with the campaigning. Irene Wills, the Chairman I've just taken over from, when she took over she launched the campaign, which had been going for ages and ages and ages, but it had never been formalised, about ensuring that war widows could retain their pensions for life, irrespective of whether they remarry or form a relationship because the War Widows' Pension is a compensation. It's given as a compensation, but the war widows that remarry lost this when they remarried. They had to surrender it.

So, this was a very successful campaign in the first year. It was a really, really intense year, Irene's first year as chairman, but it was a successful campaign. What had been going on ad infinitum, Irene, together with myself and the secretary, Lorna, and a number of other members of the pensions working group, saw a successful conclusion. You saw what a small body of women could do, and while it's War Widows' Association, it also includes widowers, but you could see this small group of people – who are volunteers, who have no staff, no offices, there's nothing; it's just totally from home – could make a difference. I suppose working with Irene through those three years of her Chairmanship, it was very much, well, maybe I can make a difference as well. Maybe I can do something.

Maybe I can bring the War Widows' Association not into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but we can move it on because it's like anything, it shouldn't be static. It shouldn't be the same as it was in '71 when it was formed. So yes, I think it was just that desire to make a difference. I had been involved with the Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committee at home and, through listening to debates, I became involved in the Victims and Survivors Forum. It's all very much making things better, making life, I suppose, better and helping other people who perhaps are not at that position yet, to either get to that position or to help them help themselves.

**I: Do you think that being the widow of a soldier who was killed in the Troubles differs in any way to being a widow of a soldier killed elsewhere? Do you think there's a particular status or lack of status associated with Troubles widows?**

R: That's a good question. It's complicated. I don't know about the status because it's the government that define the status of a war widow. I think there is a difference in the fact that ... I suppose in Northern Ireland, UDR widows, RUC widows, you were living within

the community, and because the Troubles were still ongoing, you were very aware that you didn't want to draw attention to yourself or to your circumstances. I think, in some people's minds, a war widow from the Troubles is not the same as somebody killed in the Second World War. I think this is the image that we have been trying, in the War Widows' Association, to get away from. Irrespective of what the conflict was, if you're defined as a war widow, you are a war widow. It doesn't matter the cause of death, where the death occurred. Every death is different, every grieving process is different.

I mean, there's similarities in the stages you go through, but it shouldn't lessen the death because it's in Northern Ireland, or in Iraq, or in Afghanistan, or in the Falklands. We're united in the fact that we are war widows. But I think there always will be that, I suppose, conflict over whether you're more deserving than I am or whatever, and in the status. I mean you do get that within the organisation, where you're not as much a war widow as somebody else, but that's wrong. It's something we're trying to educate, and I suppose that is a big education programme, that the definition of a war widow is set out by the Ministry of Defence, so you accept that as the definition, that it's attributable to service. So, if it's asbestos-related and that has been attributed to the service, then you become a war widow if your husband has died.

That's as important because every one of those men served their country, and their death was attributed to that service, so therefore they're a war widow. I think widows, war widows, do themselves a disservice by trying or looking and saying they're not. But I don't see myself as any different than anybody else.

**I: So what way do you see the War Widows' Association moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then, or can you reveal those secrets?**

**R:** I think if we could get it to move into the 20<sup>th</sup> century it would be a bonus. But no, I mean, as I say, I've taken up the role as Chairman, and our strap line is "Through the generations. Moving forward together". That's what I would like to do. It is through the generations because it's an organisation that actually I would love to see no need for. If there was never another war widow, that would be a bonus. But our membership is probably about 10% of the overall total of war widows and widowers. I would like to look at it and look at our strategy ... because we have grown, we have grown from a campaigning organisation to ... We have the three pillars, for want of a better phrase, where we have the campaigning, we have the remembering, and we have the caring.

The caring role we do through regional organisers, our network, and they bring local groups together. The caring is done through the AGM [Annual General Meeting]. We have a four-day AGM where we organise things for members, organise events for members. Through that, and through talking to members in these more relaxed situations and at different events, that informs our campaigning. Then the remembering, I mean it's hard to believe that it was probably the mid '80s before the war widows were recognised as part of the veterans' community and allowed to walk to the Cenotaph on the Sunday British Legion muster parade. Prior to that, we weren't there, but now we're recognised as part of the veterans' community. I would like to see that being more recognised and being more widely recognised. People that know, know, but it's the people that don't know we need to inform. So I would like to look at the whole constitution of the Association. It's a very good constitution, but how we can review that to link with encouraging younger members, younger war widows who are war widows, to join, to keep it going.

I mean we'll be fifty in 2021, and if we're going to move on to the next fifty years, even if we don't change, we have to review it and look to see, does it need to change. I think we link that with encouraging more war widows to join, or war widows who are already war

widows to join, not more war widows. It's linking through that and just to move it forward. The old saying "If it ain't broke, don't fix it", but I think we should look at it to make sure it isn't broke and to move it forward and to maintain the profile that we have because we are recognised as the United Kingdom's leading representative organisation for war widows and widowers where the death has been attributed to service.

I think we're unique in the sense that we can do all this without being deflected from the welfare role into welfare because there are so many organisations out there, SSAFA (Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association), the Royal British Legion, there are so many other organisations out there that are much more able and much better set up than we are to do the welfare role. But by doing the caring role that we do and doing the remembering role, we can find out what the big issues are.

**I: Great. Was there anything else that you wanted to cover that we didn't mention?**

R: Probably.

**I: We can come back again for me.**

R: I just can't think of it at the minute.

**I: That's great. Thanks so much, Mary.**