

Living in the front line

A soldier's widow who has become a campaigner on the Military Covenant, Brenda Hale talks to Sarah Meyrick

REMEMBRANCE-TIDE is difficult for Brenda Hale. Her husband, Captain Mark Hale, was killed in Afghanistan on 13 August 2009 while helping to carry to safety a colleague who had been caught in a roadside blast. He was 42, the father of two daughters. The couple had been married for 22 years.

"Anniversaries are hard," Brenda says. "The anniversaries of when we first met, our wedding anniversary. Birthdays — his own birthday, and the girls' birthdays. Christmas time is particularly difficult, when you have to do all that alone. Remembrance is when the whole country remembers. But we have to remember every day."

Brenda's story is a love story tinged by tragedy. She and Mark met in a nightclub in her home town of Bangor, County Down, when she was 16 and he was 17. She was not supposed to be in that particular club, because it had a reputation for being popular with British squaddies, and — as this was the 1980s — that meant that it was a potential terrorist target.

Mark, a boy soldier posted to Northern Ireland from Dorset, was a gangly six foot four, and good-looking, with a wicked smile. They started dating, but Brenda was terrified of telling her parents, because she knew that their relationship might put the whole family in danger. As far as her father was concerned, going out with a soldier could mean only heartache.

TEN weeks after they started seeing each other, Mark was posted to Germany for two years. In spite of her parents' disapproval, and the obstacles of a long-distance relationship, they faithfully wrote letters and visited each other. Eventually, they married, and Brenda began the life of an army wife with everything that that entailed: the frequent moves, the separations, the anxious wait for news. Four days after their wedding, Mark was sent to the Falkland Islands. In all, he served six tours of duty in Northern Ireland before being deployed to Iraq, and then Afghanistan.

Yet it was a wonderful life. If she could speak to her teenage self now, she would not change a thing. "I'd tell her to go for it," she says. "I'd say, 'Marry that man.' I do not regret any of it for one minute. I'd do it all, all over again. I'd say: love him just the way you've loved him."

And if her daughters showed a desire to join the army? "I'd encourage them. It's a wonderful life. We travelled the world and made strong friendships, and it's a chance to serve your country. I had a fab time, and God worked through us. I would be very proud if one of my daughters went in to the army."

WHEN they met, neither Brenda nor Mark was a practising Christian. They came to faith a few years into their

marriage through a close friend whose life had been transformed by his own conversion. Their shared faith helped to sustain Brenda when the knock on the door brought the news that she had dreaded.

"I feel incredibly blessed. Mark blessed my life, and God blessed my life through Mark. God has been there all the way through, from the minute I met Mark. It doesn't necessarily make it any easier, but I know I am in the palm of [God's] hand."

Their faith kept them anchored, she says. "Having faith secured us. There are so many widows from 2009 from Afghanistan, but [unlike some of the others] I don't need to look where Mark is. I feel completely secure and thankful that I know where he is."

Brenda and Mark's daughters, Tori and Alix, have walked the same road through grief. "They were 16 and eight when their daddy was killed. The oldest went off at a tangent, and rebelled, but she has settled now. My youngest is now 16, and she's now processing who her father was."

SINCE Mark's death, Brenda's life has changed out of all recognition. She has become a political campaigner, and was elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly, where she served for six years before losing her seat in March. She has recently written a book about her their life together, and the years since.

"People kept saying to me, 'You need to put your story down in words. I didn't really understand what they meant. But I've gone from army wife to widow to activist to politician, always pushing the Military Covenant. I was doing what I needed to do, but people said, 'We didn't do this, but you stepped up to the plate.'"

The book is also for her daughters. "Part of the reason was to introduce Alix to her dad as an adult, which was a gift God never gave to her. One of my reasons [for writing it] was to tell them the memories I had with their dad, and for them to know who their dad was — how he turned from a ruffy-tuffy boy into a battle-hardened man."

SHE feels that there is a gap in people's understanding of army life. "There are so many books about the war in Afghanistan, but they tend to be written by soldiers, and about the battles. Not that many people write about the army families: we live in the shadows, but we're the ones directly affected by international foreign policy."

Writing the book with her friend Rachel Farmer has been cathartic but bittersweet. "Rachel is an army wife, and she and I have a lot of shared memories, and we've bounced the text back and forth. Coming home from a day's work, and having to look at chapters to edit, I've found myself sitting in tears, having to reach back into my memories.

PHOTOS ARMY BENEVOLENT FUND



Corridors of power: clockwise from left: Brenda Hale outside her office at Stormont; Captain Mark Hale; family times; Brenda serves as Northern Ireland Ambassador for the Army Benevolent Fund



"After Mark was killed, I started to want to know why the system had failed. My local MP got me to meet other MPs at Westminster. Then the DUP asked me to stand as a candidate for the Northern Ireland Assembly."

Brenda was initially reluctant. "I spoke to the elders of my church, and prayed about it, but I was Moses, I was Jonah: I didn't want to do this. I didn't want to be front-of-shop, I was quite happy with back-of-shop, and I kept trying to avoid it."

"Then I felt Mark saying, 'Why are you even thinking about not doing this? You've always loved politics.' So, I thought, 'I'll put the fleece out, it's never going to happen.' I stood for election, and was successful. There I was, sat in Stormont, and I thought, 'Eighteen months ago I was an army wife, and here I am and I've got no idea what I'm going to do.' But, all the way through, I knew I was in God's hands. I myself am not capable of any of that."

She was first elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly in May 2011, and then re-elected in May 2016. She was unseated, however, in the snap election of March this year. "It was always going to be a tough election, because the number of seats went down from 108 to 90," she says.

SHE remains actively involved in campaigning for the Military Covenant to be recognised across the four nations. "The Westminster Government sends our troops to war, but when the guys come home it's up to the devolved government to look after them. In Scotland, Wales, and England, it's OK, but it's different in Northern Ireland, and that shouldn't be the case.

"We need Westminster to ensure that the men have their mental-health and education and housing needs met. It's up to the Government to take that responsibility."

She will keep fighting, she says, because it is a way of looking after "Mark's boys" in the way that he would want have wanted her to. She is heartened by the fact that the Military Covenant featured in the Queen's Speech as part of the negotiations with the DUP, although she is concerned that everything else is being swept aside by Brexit. "I think, finally, the right people are listening."

Meanwhile, she is a board member on the Education Authority of Northern Ireland, and she continues to serve as Northern Ireland Ambassador for the Army Benevolent Fund. Beyond that, she is not sure what lies ahead. "The past six years have raised my profile, and now it's time for something else. What I've learned is to give up planning anything. I plan my holidays and hope for the best, but that's about it. God is in the driving seat."

I Married a Soldier by Brenda Hale with Rachel Farmer is published by Lion at £9.99 (CT Bookshop £9).

There's been a lot of laughter and a lot of pain. The scab is still raw. Every day is a journey of grief, and I can choose whether to make it positive or not."

HER move into campaigning has taken her by surprise, although she had been interested in politics since the age of nine, when her father called her into the room because it had just been announced that Margaret Thatcher had become Prime Minister. But Mark's death brought practical challenges alongside the emotional ones. Although he had died in the service of his country, the family were left with no money. Brenda's MP, Jeffrey Donaldson, was supportive, and she soon found herself campaigning for the rights of military families.

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