# Karen Interview 1 – 16 Nov 2018

(airwoman, 37 years, divorced, no, +3)

## C

Why did you join the military, all those years ago?

## Karen

My Dad was in the Air Force, erm he had been in the Air Force for 40 years, me brother was in the Army my sister had been in the Air force it seemed  a natural thing to do erm I had no intention of making a career of it, I was going to do 6 years erm see the world er and that was it and I was going to join up as an admin clerk <>< my dad was but he said no join up as MT cause you will get your licenses if nothing else. <><><>< erm and the next thing I knew I had done 36 years it was like .... what happened thee then, I am not quite sure where all that time went you know.

## C

Was that an unusual trade for a woman to join back then?

## Karen

yeh, there wasn't very many females then erm and I have had I've got some good stories well I've got a very good story I'll tell you about when I was on detachment you know. erm but yeh it was quite it was still a bit well you know can you change a tyre? can you do this? can you do that? cause you are a female you know?  But it erm well I never had any problems though do you know what I mean there wasn't anybody that was ever, e there was one person.  Oh, do you want me to tell you that story now or?

## C

yeh, go for it.

## Karen

yeh erm I was a Cpl and I was I'd been in 17 years erm my out of area came up for the for Falklands so as a CBFs driver, so yeh not a problem, his PA rang me and said "Oh I believe you are coming out here to be CBFs Driver" I said "yeh", he said "Erm, do you not fancy Turkey or Incirlik or something?" I said "Why?" and he said "Well just because it’s the Falkland’s" and I went "yes but <>< what's the hidden meaning here?" and he said "well you are female." and I went "yes" and he said "what will you do then if you get a flat with the boss in the car?" and I went "ok, I've been a tradesperson for 17 years. If I get a flat in the car I will change it" "well are you capable". Well that was it.  Absolutely fuming and I said "Right" I said "Have you asked any male if they want Turkey or Cyprus or whatever they would have said yes as well but I said "you know I'm coming out there.  I'm coming out there to prove I can do the job." And it was really ironic cause I didn't have any issues the whole 4 months I was there the day I handed over to my male replacement we had a flat and it took us 4, between the 2 of us, 4 hours to change the damm thing, so you know and I told CBF in my departure interview and he sort of went "Really" and I said "yeh, do you know what I made it my goal that I was going to come out here and prove" and I just thought how that is the one and only time really I've had it when someone has been serious.  I've jokes where people have said oh you don't know anything about and I have gone in and said "Oh I'm going to go sick, get the ambulance I've broken a nail" you know what I mean sort of thing.  Erm But yeh I've had, during my career I did come across females that used to give the erm "oh it’s that time of the month I'm not very well" to my male counterparts and you know I used to say to them "what are you doing with so and so" and they'd say "well they are not very well" Horlicks they are fine erm let me have a chat with them, do you know what I mean, because they were just ... not all of them but the majority of the times they were pulling, swinging the lead because the men could not handle women.  And it was easier for the seniors to turn around and go "yeh go away go away" cause they couldn't man up and treat, they still saw females as little things that could be broken rather than a tradesperson and a I have another story when I was at Cranwell erm we used to erm take lots of the cadets on exercise and stuff and er back in them days it was just 4 tonners and 5 tonners drags drag units that we had.  Erm nothing easy you know you used to have to pick up the A Frame of the eh trailer hold it while the other person reversed back, when you think about health and safety, total <><>, you could have been crushed but you just did it and there was a young lad and he must have been about 5ft tall and 8 stone dripping wet and he jumped out of the 4 tonner and he sorry I was in the 4 tonner he was trying to left the A Frame, and I said right get in the 4 tonner I'll lift the A Frame and I did it because he couldn't and it was just it was those sort of things you know that I suppose when I look back on it we did get treated with kid gloves but not so much now people tend to realise they treat you like an individual and your capabilities regardless of what sex you are you know erm which I think is a good thing.

## C

yeh, yeh.  Ok so it was basically a family business which is not unusually for to get that in the forces is it, a lot of families.  But erm so why did you stay in what was it that drove you to stay?

## Karen

I love the com the camaraderie erm I just I don't know cause when I look back over those 36years you know and the irony is when I was younger I wanted 2 kids, cat, a dog and a gold fish.  Erm got married and it just never materialised because actually I wanted my career, erm when I look back it didn't mean more to me than my marriage but it meant as much to me as my marriage because I enjoyed my job and I liked helping people.  I felt that I could do that and it I I worked hard obviously got through the ranks to get to Warrant Officer and it was I just felt it was a real family atmosphere.  you know and you were looked after, I've had my moments don't get me wrong when they treat you just as a number erm but generally speaking that you know that camaraderie you get within the service you don't get anywhere else it is completely different being a family you know.

## C

So, for you then obviously you didn't choose to leave you have left at the retirement.  Erm but when did you really start thinking about that decision or that leaving was it ..

## Karen

Erm, about the 3-year point about 3 years ago.  When I got posted to Waddington erm I knew then I had 4 and a half years left so I knew that was going to be my end of tour but I wasn't worried about it, when I started wh what I was going to do about 3 years ago erm because of my medical I was permanently downgraded so I knew I wouldn't get signed on, and in all honestly I didn't want to get signed on I'd had enough and I didn't want to become the better  and twisted person you know erm and it I suppose everybody says you know that the Air Force has changed phenomably you know it’s not the Air Force I joined up you know but I just don't I don't particularly like what it stands for any more. Erm or what it is doing to its people and so it’s not it wasn't the Air Force for me.  Erm I thought I could do a lot better coming out and doing what I am doing at the moment erm than staying in and also, I for my health cause if I'd stayed in I probably would have been dead within 2 years because of the stress and the pressure.

## C

yeh, can we just explore that a little bit then, you said you don't like what the Air Force stands for any more and what it is doing to its people.

## Karen

yeh its I think we pay lip service I think erm they have cut us back so much there is no money there is no personnel but they want us to do twice as much work than we ever have done I mean when I think I I had been in the Air Force 17 years before I went on an Out of area   because there wasn't anything.  Now the guys are doing 17 months if that and going out and the pressure for us to get them qualified and experienced erm I mean when I joined up you did a year before you even went and touched a heavy goods vehicle because you could get the road <><><>< put that into , don't get me wrong we didn't have same trade training then and health and safety as we do now but you were still you were on the roads you were getting that skill before being thrown into a heavy goods vehicle.  Whereas now they go to Leckonfield and they can go from having no license at all to LVG license within 17 weeks.  And then they come to the unit and the onus is on us to give them that skill set if you like but we haven't got the manpower to do it to do it properly so I think we are putting a lot on our people and it’s not I used to go to the human factors you know courses and it wasn't just MT because of course we had the whole range and it I was I got quite worried actually listening to stories and fatigue and what we were doing to our people and thinking no one is listening.  Because nothing drastic had happened yet don't ask me how but I think we are on a knife edge, obviously when I was at Waddington we did the Bolt Hole for 3 years erm and every day I thanked my lucky stars that nothing happened.

## C

Really

## Karen

because you know how there wasn't a major accident and I I did everything I could feasibly about fatigue erm and I used to get the old shut up Karen stop panicking and it’s all about MT and I used to say it’s not just about its not just MT and about driving when when we're killing our people because we are expecting them to work 12 hours and then most people live off camp and then we are expect them to drive an hour each way.

## C

yeh

## Karen

And then have family time and  and its I think we were extremely lucky but its I just think as well they have taken so much away from us you know the benefits, all the nice things erm don't get me wrong there is a plus side like all the erm AT and the expeds the guys can go on but that has a knock on effect because we lose the guys to do that and someone has to do their work so there is more pressure on other people it’s just I don't know there I think the Air Force military at the moment are looking at short term contracts to save money so they just want people in just to do the job and then go they don't have to pay pensions the problem with that is of course you are losing all your expertise.  Erm and people, people are starting to erm not care because they feel like no one is listening.  And when I look, I always I I find it intriguing I used to say at CAS conference what are our medical stats like?  Oh, we can't share that cause it is medical in confidence, well surely, we must be able to see if there has been a rise in people with depressions, stress there has to be they don't have to name names but there should be able to see the figures and do something about it.  But I also understand the people at the top there hands are tied because they are getting beaten from above and it’s just I say it got to the point because I was they offered me and said erm would I er would erm sign on you know and I said no because there was nothing I could do to change the situation you know erm you know erm but the funny thing is I'm looking at going back on the VeRR,

## C

oh yes

## Karen

you know one of the ex-reservists erm work Cranwell has got a Base Support Wing Group and er they need loggies so I am looking at that because I feel that I can help there. If I can actually help take the pressure off somebody else. And use my expertise to maybe change things.

## C

yeh

## Karen

It’s worth a try.

<><><><><>

## C

that is always good, so if I just ask you what is your most vivid memory of service life.  I know that is a hard question after so many years, if you could give a specific incident but don't worry if you can't.  If it is more of a general …

## Karen

One that always sits in my head is I was on detachment in Italy in erm 1995, and erm in Gioa Del Col and my father unfortunately had a heart attack and I have never know something to come together so quickly to get me back home and that I must admit they were fantastic and it and it worked and I always thought wow they look after us, they look after us you know.  Unfortunately, they did twice because I went back to Italy and then he had a fatal heart attack you know but on both occasions that is what I think we are good at, we we when excuse the terminology but when the poo hits the fan, we just we pull together and we do and that is something that is something I did like.  Regardless of I used to feel that I couldn't help my team but I also knew that when we got into the thick of it we would pull together and we wold do everything that we were capable of to get it sorted.  You know erm when it comes to my best tour I have to admit probably in 36 years it was the 4 and a half years I spent at Halton on ACS as an Instructor because again I felt like a was doing something and it was working with 15 other people all mates and you know it was just brilliant brilliant time erm the other things that stick in my head really are the out of areas again because you pull together as a team because you are all in the same boat and it is amazing what you can achieve.  And what you don't need you know I come and you know if I miss my soaps that’s it, you know, I will probably go and watch catch up you, and yet for 4 months you wouldn't watch TV.  It didn't bother me, we just did you know.  So, its I think that as a generalisation.

## C

So, you talked a little bit out of the overstretch would you say that was your main concern while you were in the, whilst you were in the service towards the end.

## Karen

yeh definitely we I still think we live in a blame culture.  and I when I brought that up in Exes meetings I was told no its not but I said yes, it is.  Because if something goes wrong we immediately look to find who did it rather than really understanding why you know what it was ad I have got an example of that.  We had a, I called it Tattershall Gate, a young lad erm when we were on Bolt Hole he had gone to Coningsby to pick up erm some, I do apologise I've got messages coming up on my screen I don't know if you can see them of not?

## C

No, you are alright.

## Karen

Erm and er he went to go and pick up some er legs for the aircraft a really awkward load there was a lot of background stuff there wasn't a lot of help a lot of stuff had gone on.  But basically, what happened was he nearly lost the load.  He had gone round a corner and it had shifted but he didn't lose it, he knew something was wrong, he stopped, and he sorted it out.  But you would have thought e world had come to an end you would have thought that he killed 3 kids a dog a coat and erm <><><>, there was a big there was an OSI on it erm and a huge report that went on for about for about 5 months we never heard the end of it and thought ok fine not a problem. About 14 months after it was closed  we had a similar incident and my flight sergeant was asked to investigate it by the Wing Commander and I came out I'd gone to erm I'd gone to some meeting, but when I came back in again she was laughing at me and said "so then tab 7" I went "what" she said "it’s all your fault then" and "what are you on about" anyway to cut a long story short she showed me the report and at the end it said that the only person that was culpable was me.  Tab 7.  Now it was always supposed to be anonymous but at the front when it said 19:04that there was Tag 1 would be, erm I don't know er a driver, and it was so bad that it said Tag 7 WO with 34 years’ experience

## C

(laughs)

there is only you

## Karen

yeh there is only one WO in MT do you know what I mean and once this is ratified it would go on what's it called, there are not ASOS erm ahh AIMS er it would go on there so anybody if they wanted to could look at this report and see what had happened so there was my credibility then.  So, and what I was more disgusted about and I took it to the station commander was the fact that nobody had come back and fed that report to me.

## C

yes, so you were unaware of it.

## Karen

my Flight Sergeant was the one who read it and say to me "It was all your fault" I turned round and said how could it be all my fault when at the end of the day it is the drivers responsibility ultimately for their load erm and what had happened was command had issued this risk assessment erm and it was a new and it was about 52 pages long and everybody just do it and we hadn't implemented it but when the team had gone round

to different units 2 MT turned around and said "what risk assessment" Coningsby had said they knew nothing about it so it wasn't just Waddington that hadn't implemented it and in fact we were implementing it we just hadn't go to that yet erm so er I I understood that as the MTO as the WO it will always be ultimately my responsibility but it was just it was more that fact that nobody had said anything to me.

## C

And how are you supposed to learn and correct if you don't even know

## Karen

yeh I couldn't even defend myself it was even like I could turn round and say well actually I und the station commander ultimately if anything goes wrong it’s the station commanders fault.  But he isn't the one that has actually gone and done it he is just the head of the establishment.  But I didn't even have a chance to turn round and put my case forward or anything and it was just there for everybody I didn't know how many people had read it and my reputation and scarred erm and I just thought it was terrible and when I questioned it, they said oh we didn't mean that and what they said was although I was culpable no disciplinary action would be taken although it had been considered because I had done it for the right reason.  Excuse me!  So, they were thinking of disciplinary action and I didn't know about that you know and that is I to be honest with you that was the icing on the cake.  And I went you know what no.  I don't need this anymore and if you are going to treat your people like that and we are saying we are not in a blame culture but you are turning round and saying that it is you know and I thought No.

## C

Can you just, can you just describe how that made you feel then, how that ..

## Karen

Oh, I was to be honest I was in tears I was frustrated I felt that at that time I had done 35 and a half years and I was thinking so I I I felt completely ... as if they had ripped my heart out to be honest with you.  Erm because they had made a decision about me without me even having the right to reply or even knowing about it or and it was just so wrong you know and then to cap it off really which was another reason why I left I I why I was glad I left.  I've got through the post erm er summary of service and the hand writing on the front of the envelope, I'll have to get I'll have to find it and take a photograph and send it to you.  It looked like a two-year-old had written it. It was signed off by the Squadron Leader PSF and it was just a piece of paper in between a piece of card and that was it and it was like after 36years that was the Ari Force saying t-ra.  And don't get me wrong the station commander I had an interview with him and he gave me a set of Waddington cufflinks that was very very nice erm but I thought there is not that many WOs leave a unit after 36 years so therefore he could easily have signed that piece of paper and when I questioned it they said well he is busy.23:42 I said oh he’s not that he probably didn't even know that that piece of paper existed you know and I just thought what is it?  I understand that everybody is busy I understand that they have a lot of work to do but if that is how they are treating me after 36 years what are they doing to the  guys that have done 5, 10, 15 do you know what I mean and it’s almost like you are not worthy and I thought na and it and it that was the icing  on the cake if you like that was a em em the the fact that they just don't care but people don't care because they haven't got the time too.  Cause they are maxed out, I went back to a Top Table the other week and I was hearing they were telling me what was going on and I said you know it sounded worse than Jeremy Kyle to be honest with you.  Erm and I said can I tell you that I don't miss it, I do not miss all the welfare all the issues all the drama and I think people join up now because it's just a job and they know it’s for them.  I had two lads when I was in at Waddington who basically, lots of things happened, er and lots of disciplinary and I had them in and said look I think you need to look at whether or not this is the career for you, erm, I don't think it is.  I mean one of the guys every time he he was going to be deployed he just played sick and I said at the end of the day if you can't do your job then we have got to get rid of you, and I said you need to look "I can't afford to leave" he said I've just got married and I need to put a roof over my wife’s head and I said the Air Force they are not there to to do that they will pay you but you need to do a little bit in return.  You have to work, you know and I think people outside have just seen the military as a job to go to for a guaranteed wage and then when they get in  and realise actually you have to work for  a living like you do anywhere but once there in its quite hard to get them out, do you know what I mean cause we look after them very well in that respect, so.

## C

ok so ok.

## Karen

I'm sounding very bitter and twisted aren't I sorry and I don't mean to be

## C

No but its these things have an impact don't they I mean all of that effected your decision affected your decision not to sign on erm

## Karen

yeh

## C

And that's what I have found with a couple of people actually who have reached your stage and I mean were you asked to sign on in relatively good time another individual he was actually on his terminal leave and they asked him to sign on.

## Karen

yeh no they <><><>< to but I think that I had made it clear that I wouldn't erm I had gone for the Command Masters Drivers job unintentionally, an e-mail had gone out erm saying did anyone want it  and I replied out of curtsey curtesy cause there is nothing worse than sending an e-mail out and nobody replies and I just said look I've only got 2 years left it would have been my dream job you all know it would have been erm but I I can't do 2 years it’s just not enough time.  Anyway, they came back to me and said would you go for the job because actually nobody else wants it and you would be ideal for it.  Well I went so I thought by that time I'd I'd resigned myself to coming out and I was planning everything and I thought do you know what maybe I can do something here.  Maybe I can all these things that are going wrong within the trade maybe maybe I can sort it.  So then it all went erm and then all of a sudden somebody else had gone for the job but they didn't actually want the job they were just doing the project <><> and wanted another job that was going to be coming up in 2 years later er to cut a long story short even though everybody said the jobs yours the jobs yours the jobs yours I didn't get it and I was made to feel really small because everybody in the trade all the WO had said the jobs yours it’s got to be you.  And I thought you know what Na, and when they went they were hinting and the said oh do you want to do continuance erm cause you could stay at Waddington and I said you must be joking I'm not going to be treated like that and the only reason they wanted me to stay at Waddington was because Waddington was such a hell hole nobody else wanted it and I went na you know what get let’s get somebody else in and let’s see if they can make a difference and you know erm because again they used to use Waddington all the time and say Waddington has done this wrong <><>, everybody was doing the same thing but they would keep it quiet.  It just happened that I would turn around and say we need to look at this this is and I stuck my head above the parapet and I actually got another OSI raised because of what was happening within MT and I said I need a full investigation knowing that it could really damage me but I needed someone to turn round and say there is an issue here.

## C

You wanted to yeh

## Karen

It worked out when they did it yeh in their report they said yeh there is not enough manpower they need an extra sergeant they need I wasn't going to get it but it proved the fact that the reason we were failing was because we didn't have the manpower support. As it turned out we got the extra sergeant and and that came to fruition in the October the sergeant came in.

## C

Ok

## Karen

But this was 18months 2 years 18 months after the event but at least they had got it you know.   Erm and it was everybody said to me why are you doing it and I said because I just felt that nobody was listening and the only way to listen was to have an OSI where people have to do a report and it would go the station commander and something would

be done, you know.  There we go.

## C

yeh. And yet you want to your considering going back on the VeRRs contract?

## Karen

yeh yeh

## C

Despite all of this?

## Karen

yeh I think because maybe I can help when there’s loads of projects and stuff that and also, I know if I could have had when I was in, if I could have had a sergeant and a corporal on VeRRs two days a week oh my god my life would have been so much easier.  And I just think do you know what If I can go in and help somebody take a bit of pressure off them but also do erm do erm<<><><project manage to do with the cadets they are a bit worried with the driving part and the health and safety erm and if I can go away and take the pressure off someone but then also create a safe environment then I am quite happy.  Yeh your talking 2 days a week erm or you can choose your hours it’s not it’s not there’s never the pressure, there is no out of areas there’s is no welfare there is no SJARs.  (laughs) erm

## C

So, what would that give you then what do you think doing that role would give you personally?

## Karen

To me a bit of satisfaction.  I erm I like helping people which is why I do I'm what I am at the moment a I am a self-employed trainer er but I work for I don't know if you have heard of the Consults they do a lot of training and my my er er assertiveness, confidence that sort of stuff.  'you know so I go and deliver with them but at the moment I am starting my own business with the Princes Trust so erm I facilitate a day of talking about Tax you know National Insurance cash flows you know and it is great to be help to help them erm and I think because of my experience cause I know what it is like in the real world I could go into a job like that and be able to turn around right the book says this it doesn't work in reality what we need to do is this or how do we get that done as safe as possible.  And be able to maybe effect change.  Er without all the other pressures that are around.

## C

yeh yeh ok so in your in your new life in you like is there anything you are particularly concerned about now, now you are out of the service?

## Karen

No, not really I mean I am I'm lucky my pension although it is only half of what I was getting which took a little bit of getting used to do you know what I mean you could <><><> erm but my pension is equivalent to what some people bring home in a wage so my builder pays I have enough money to live so I am doing the beautiful thing is now I am doing work that I want to do.  When I want to do it and that is what I like and I vowed that I wouldn't I wouldn't go back to be employed where I have to sing to somebody else’s tune.  Which I know sounds a bit backwards with the VeRRs but the VeRRs I can choose whether you want to take the project.  They say right and it doesn't have to be MT it could be anything.

## C

yeh

## Karen

And they just look at you know you CV and actually we have go this project on can you do it? It’s not a problem or na the sun is shining I want to go out in the garden.  You know and there is no issue.

## C

yeh so you have go the control basically.

## Karen

yeh yeh and it   cause I think I didn't want to do Monday to Friday 8 til 5, I've had enough of that. Erm but I still I am too young just to be stuck doing nothing.  So, it’s quite nice in a sense to be able to go and do this work and I do some work at home.  I mark, I mark erm er ILM assignments

## C

Ahhhh

## Karen

and er I do risk assessments type stuff as well for training environments you know so its its as far as I can do it I can choose what time I am going to do it and when I am going to do it.  Hence why I am having building work cause I am having it’s not an office it’s a study.

## C

yeh, like mine.  My kids are sharing a bedroom cause I need a study.

## Karen

yep, will if I would show you round it but my there are just boxes everywhere and my printer is on a box

## C

yeh

## Karen

and I am like it will be alright in the end and I am one of these people34:13 I procrastinate, I need to be in an office environment to work otherwise I sit there and go oh that needs to be hovered, oh I'd better go and do that you know erm so my garage is being converted into a utility and an office so I can actually go in there, I've got a flip type easel I've got <><>< I'll be able to work and then shut the door and come out and and relax you know.

## C

yeh

## Karen

erm and I do erm I I am going on a retreat this weekend erm and I am actually delivering erm a bit of mindfulness cause I am into all that sort of stuff as well you know.  I know and it’s just and I would do everything for free if I could 34:54 to help people. But that that doesn't pay for a holiday, you know.

## C

No no it doesn't.  That is why I am doing what I am doing.  Ok brilliant.  So, if you had a magic wand and you could change absolutely anything about the Air Force what would it be?

## Karen

Erm sorry to take out of the Air Force or to give back to the Air Force?

## C

No change, if you had a magic wand and you could change anything?

## Karen,

Erm they need more people.  they need they need to have what we used to have because of the volume of work.  So, it will take the pressure off because then if you take the pressure of people they can get to do a 100% to their work rather than be jack of all trades and master of none.  Erm and it would give them a bit of you know there are some <<><>< not so much pride because they have pride we are not very good at saying thank you. And <><>< people there is a lot of lip service of nominate somebody for an award do this but all it is is that when you are really really busy giving you another report to write do you know what I mean so people go (sigh) I'll do it you know so although they want to do it they just don't have the time to do it so I think you know there needs to be more people but that is never going to happen.

## C

No

## Karen

And the scary thing is I mean it’s like when I was leaving Waddington and they wanted me to lose another 2 drivers cause of the civilianisation <><>< and I was saying <><><>< you understand we are struggles we are going through we don't like the support we are giving you and yet you are asking me to give up another 2 drivers, that sort of thing so I think across the board and that's only obviously I can only speak about my trade but across the board everybody was hit so I think we need to have if they were canny they could use this VeRRs very very very very well because as I said when I was at Waddington if they had given me a sergeant and a corporal to work two days a week that would have taken a lot of pressure off me, the niff naff and trivia that has to be done that never gets done because people are dealing with other priorities, you know.

## C

Ok so if you erm had to describe military life to someone who didn't understand it how would you describe it to them?

## Karen

Erm a big family looks after each other, looks after their own er a lot of a lot of opportunities to do stuff em and an experience that you won’t get anywhere else and I still believe that erm but it is a different Air Force, I wouldn't say that I wouldn't put somebody off by saying it’s a different Air Force do you know what I mean there are a lot of positives and I think when you join now you join a different Air Force  but what hasn't gone is individuals looking after individuals and that's that <><< I think when they look at us at the top, you are just a number and no one really cares about you and nothing has changed since WW1 and WW2 when it was the seniors that actually managed it and looked after because you look after your people and you look after your troops but I think people are tired of fighting erm and they just want to go which is why they are losing a lot of people  I mean when I look at my trade we had something like 13 flight sergeants and sergeants, 13 seniors leave within a 15 months period, that has got to be telling them something you know.

## C

yeh that is a lot. yeh

## Karen

So, and just because of the way things are you know it is still you still will not get that experience anywhere else, you will not get that comradeship anywhere else. Erm and when it comes to support welfare wise medical, dental and welfare you can't beat it they are there for you but that is probably their downfall as well because there is too much welfare now you know, cause it’s a little bit some of the people need to man up and that is me being a little bit harsh but yeh.

## C

ok, so how how do you think it has changed then ...being?39:45

## Karen

Well when I joined there was a hundred and twenty-five thousand people.  And we didn't have any wars you know 17 years 17 we used to have the cold war effect so we did the exercises and stuff like that but we didn't have anything, I was 17 years in before we actually started to do anything so we have gone from a hundred and twenty five thousand to 33 thousand and I know they say the whole force concept where you get the contractors and the erm the MoD civil servants and everything but what they don't see is for example when I was at Coningsby there was 9 I had a Corporal with 19 of us so 19 corporals shared all the service secondary duties that there were so they civilianised and we went down to 9 corporals and 10 civilians but those secondary duties that had to be done by a military person were then instead of being shared between 19 had to be shared between 9 so it’s alright saying you have the continuity that the civilians give but they wouldn't take on those responsibilities and it has got like that and it has continued to go like that where you end up wearing a lot of different hats and there is only 8 hours in the day and something has to give so it’s that erm unless that's is what I think is the biggest change we have decreased in numbers but  we have increased in actual work load so erm.

## C

yeh and erm I take it you lived in your own home when you were at Waddington.

## Karen

yeh I have been very lucky I've only ever actually lived away from home once when I was at Halton.  Everywhere else I've commuted, yeh extremely lucky.

## C

So, you are established if you like in the local community which must be nice you know you are not starting from scratch are you.

## Karen

No, because I have been here 30 years I'm part of the community so my friends are civilian so yeh I that wasn't such a big leap for me. I think the biggest thing that I was worried about was and it wasn't the rank thing ..

## C

Sorry it wasn't the?

## Karen

It wasn't the rank it wasn't the fact that I was a Warrant Officer it wasn't the rank it was the fact that being needed by people to not being needed.  That is what was worrying me because I thought I'll go from you know, I was there mother, you know their mother their auntie their best friend and to have nothing that was a big a big change you know.  <><><><><>< (calls off screen to someone to make a coffee) 42:45

## C

the worry that you loosing that need that people

## Karen

yeh I am that type of person I want to help but I need to feel needed as well and I think that's why going into this what I do now where I facilitate erm and help people realise what they know what they can do I think and yes I was working yesterday and at the end of the day I we went through and summarised it all and I said right have you found today useful erm have you got what you needed to out of it do you know where to go? Brilliant, yes thank you very much erm <><><    and it was that you know knowing that you have actually made a difference to somebody

## C

yes

## Karen

that's that's I I admit I need that I need to be able to make a difference to somebody, at some point you know.

## C

ye yeh that's all all good.  So, when you actually left could you just describe how that felt?  That actual few months as you came towards the end and

## Karen

Well it is funny because before I left I'd said I was going to have a dozen leaving dos cause I am renowned in the trade for having parties and I did have several leaving dos but it really hit home you know when I got taken off the station.  And I have a penchant for Firemen (laughter) and erm they they got a and they were and the <><><> cutter was just behind MT and erm and they presented me with some champagne and flowers and stuff there was <><>< and I had some bits going on and when we walked round there was the fireman you know the big fire engine there so erm they took me for a ride round the camp and we were doing our stuff and then they drove me off the station and as we came you know Waddington where the medical centre is well there were people standing there and it was a Friday afternoon, half two in the afternoon, and there wasn't it was all med centre and I was chocked up that they had actually stood out and when I came round the corner all the rest of MT and all my guys had done a guard of honour for me and all of supply and that was me I just cracked. Cause it was just you know very emotional and that is when it hit home and I just thought wow I'm finished.  Do you know what I mean? So and then I went back because I have got a contractors pass and erm so I went back onto camp to camp to collect it and the guard stopped me and I said "oh I've got my driving license but I don't have an ID card on me" and er "oh alright" erm "the confusion is last week I was a Warrant Officer and and I just need to pick up my pass" this bloke at the picket went "oh that's ok Ma'am" and he went "what do I call you?" and I said "Karen sweet cause that's my name" and he went "aright then ma'am see you later".  you know and I just thought how cute is that and that is that thing about you earn respect people will treat you not necessarily cause there is a name there you know but because of who you are and I have always prided myself in getting work done and not having to say "do you know who I am?"  I've done it I think twice both times to my Squadron Leader (laughter) when he was getting pressure and erm "you have to do this" and erm and I'd say "Sir, this is not bird shit on my shoulder, this is a Warrant Officer, this is my Flight, this is my Department.  This is what is happening.  I'll get you know what I will go home now and I'll go home and you can sit in this office and you can manage all that then."  But that was only a couple of times I never had to do it you know any other time because you shouldn't need to you know but yeh that I think that and then I had a er Top Table, erm that that was emotional.  Erm and I had some fantastic and it was just like well,   bless you  (cup of tea arrives) 47:23 47:46 and its funny because I had gone to the Hive at Cranwell and erm to meet a friend and one of the Wing Commanders was there and saying how well you look and blah blah blah and then he came back and asked about the VeRRs thing and he explained it all and I said I'm interested in it and my friend turned around and said oh that's brilliant that's just what you need cause you are finding it difficult  to leave the Air Force and I said I can assure you sweetheart I haven't found it difficult.  And I haven't and I think people expected me to dig my claws in and scream "no I am not leaving".  But I'm I'd been working on it and I think this is why I needed a lot of leaving dos because I needed to work into that and needed to see people that I had worked with and say goodbye do you know what I mean and it er I mean I drive past Waddington now and I just laugh, yeh it's not my problem so it’s just great.  So, I do not miss that at all you know and in fact this VeRRs thing I would do it in civvies.  Cause er cause you have to have your uniform on and I was thinking and it is not about that it’s not even about wearing the WO rank it doesn't bother me I would go in civvies every day and do the same work erm it’s nice to be paid the same amount minus your know your x-factor that's I am quite happy getting paid as a warrant officer that's fine I couldn’t argue with that.  But it is not to to me it’s not the rank that gives you the credibility it’s the job, you know doing a good job and if I can do a good job then that's it so.

## C

yep, why why do you think your friend said that though?  why do you think you friend said you are finding it difficult?  When you didn't feel you were.

## Karen

Erm I think because that was her perception.  And we were both workaholics and she would be working in PSF until 10 o'clock at night and I would be e-mailing her when I was still in work saying why are you still in work you silly thing, same reason you are!  But that was more pride in wanting to get the work done you know getting the work done and there wasn't enough hours I mean your husband has probably told you as you have gathered from this conversation I do like to talk. (laughter) I would spend my day talking to people because that to me is part of the management job.

## C

yes

## Karen

erm coaching them without them realising they were being coached and making sure they were alright and I always swore I would never be that Warrant Officer where the door was shut, my door was always open because if someone ever had a problem it might be huge to them but very very small to me and it could be something that could be solved maybe in 5 minutes.  So if I could do that or get them on <><>< then actually I would have a better workforce and if I had a better workforce that's less stress all the way round you know so I used to do that and then I used to end up staying at night time to read my 100 and odd e-mails that I had in the day and you know erm and do the admin part of the job if you like.

## C

yeh, so what would you say has the biggest change for you personally in leaving?51:07

## Karen

for me my health and the stress in fact actually somebody said to me the other day erm that I look 10 years younger than I did 6 months ago you know when they say me last.  Erm and people have said to me I look better now than I did before and I'm like well yeh because all the stress because even though I was the Warrant Officer my biggest fear was failing my guys and the pressure that they were under I used to try and eliminate it all the time but I eliminated it by putting the pressure on me if you like.  But I didn't I didn't want to erm I I was accused all the time of making excuses for my guys and I would say that's because they are maxed out.  They work too hard and what do you want me to do? Break them?  And sometimes the comments back would be "if they break, they break"

## C

MM

## Karen

and how would that work because then someone goes off with stress, they're off sick, there you know depression is horrible.  But then the people left behind now have even more work to do.  How does that work?

## C

MM

## Karen

So, you know what I mean but the people that are saying that, the only reason they said it and I truly believe it it’s not because they are heartless people, but because they are under so much pressure themselves they just needed to get that job done.

## C

yeh

## Karen

So, it that "just do it" you know "make it happen" a saying I hate "make it happen".  Erm

you know and it used to frustrate me that I would go and say this cannot be done because it’s not legal.  "Find a way to make it happen" What part of it's not legal we can't do it do you not understand? "Make it happen" right do you know what I mean, it’s that that sort of stuff.  But erm yeh it erm I don't have that any more.

## C

Did you realise it was making you ill?

## Karen

yeh yeh I was erm I suffered I had a breakdown back in about 97 but that was due to d d personal circumstances, if you know what I mean, my brother-in-law died erm my father died my husband left me my father-in-law my mother-in-law was hit by a car and seriously hurt.  My husband at the same time my ex-husband had a brain tumour all these things happened over a 5-year period.  And then I broke

## C

MMM

## Karen

because I had not actually grieved or done anything and then it just all imploded.  Erm but them what 2 and a half years ago the same thing happened but that was due to work stress and a lot to do with the investigations and stuff and I ended up I was back on medication erm but they I said to them do not tell me to go home because if you tell me to go home that is going to increase my stress levels because I will be sat there knowing that all that work

## C

worrying

## Karen

and that work will have to be done by my sergeants and my flight sergeant who are already stretched so all you are doing is actually making me more stressed so that is not the answer but what I need is a bit more leeway and <><><< and medication helped.

## C

yep

## Karen

So

## C

It’s supposed to isn't it I suppose

## Karen

yeh definitely yeh.

## C

So, did you see the warning signs that second time do you think?

## Karen

yeh yeh that is why I went, yeh that's why I went cause I could see it happening Well I wasn't sleeping, I wasn't eating, wish could of lost weight <><><>< what's wrong with this it’s not fair.  (laughter) erm it wasn't the fact I wasn't tired I was I would just wake up at 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning and be wide awake and then and I was just working on auto pilot and it was silly and that is when mistakes can happen and as the warrant officer that could have been crucial do you know what I mean.   you know what I mean, it could have but

## C

yeh

## Karen

yeh it wasn't a nice time and I thought you know what if I carry on like this, it it

will kill me which you know

## C

yeh well its er its er a known path for warrant officer.  as you said it’s interesting that they wouldn't discuss any figures but they must have figures.  And erm we all we have these impressions in our minds don't we of warrant officers who leave and then ..... I don't even want to say it.

## Karen

within a year well yeh yeh but they do because you go from full whack to nothing and I I was clever and at the beginning of this year because I knew I had like 6 months to do I stated to do less and less and what I did was I didn't have all my leave at the end from last year I was taking a day off a week.  erm which helped with my stress but also got people used to the fact that 'she's going'

## C

yeh

## Karen

and then at the beginning of this year I started taking 2 days off.  But it sort of backfired on me because I would take 2 days off which was great but then I'd have 5 days work to catch up in 3 so it was a bit you know but my flight sergeant erm she was newly promoted but I kept saying to her right I want you to do this and I want you to do I will be there to support you and I will mentor you through it but I'm not you are the continuity I am not going to be here so I need you to do that so I started to off load and it worked and because I I did that I think that helped me and because I was working I've been working for the company that I work for now  since about last September erm and I would go with them and watch them train but then also I did some training for them so I I was getting I was leading myself in so it wasn't a case of RAF, RAF, RAF, stop, Civvi.

## C

Which is what I did.

## Karen

Did you?

## C

yeh

## Karen

yeh did you notice a big change, you know full on to stop?

## C

Oh God yeh because I was I went from I used to say to Steve, he'd come home and I think it was worse cause we were the same branch, he'd come home and saying I'm doing this and I'm doing that and I'd be like well why don't you do this and why don't you do that.  And he would be like will you just shut up, because you know I am not asking you to solve my problem I am just telling you how my day has gone.  and I would be going but all I have got to talk about is that I have cleaned the toilet.  yeh that's what I have done today. and er and so it was I did about a year I mean I was exhausted because we had moved so many times and when I left we had a 4 year old and a 2 year old and er I was on my knees, I had a year out basically where I just needed to recharge my batteries and the family dynamics changed instantly because we weren't trying to squeeze everything into a weekend and that was amazing we had our lives back basically because I left but erm it was hard for me because you have that position of responsibility people, you are resected people want your opinion they value what you have got to say and then all of a sudden I had nothing so yeh.

## Karen

yeh yeh when I go back into work now erm and they I'm talking to them and part of me is thinking ok right how do I answer this do I answer this as the ex-warrant officer or do I answer because I'm thinking or are they just sounding off so because it’s not my place to get involved anymore so I have to play if carefully to see

## C

What they want

## Karen

sometimes, they just want a bit of reassurance and someone who understands where they are coming from just to say you know what that's blah blah blah which then if you like I suppose my training  as a coach and mentor sort of  comes in and I can utilise that erm and what I like now is I can afford that time without thinking at the back of my head I've got those 2 SJARs I need to complete and the boss wants that thing done now it does make me smile and the Squadron Leader would say you have got til the end of the day to have this into me and I would go yeh yeh, and he would say its 5 to 5 now.  And I'd say Sir, the end of the day for me is 10 o'clock tonight so you know what it will be in your in box for tomorrow morning you know because you know it would be.  You know if I'd said something would be done it might just not be done when they want it to be done. Erm so it er I I think as well a lot of people who do come out have a 6 months sabbatical and don't do anything and I haven't done a great deal don't get me wrong and I've I've maybe 4 days a week, er 4 days a month.  erm but that is enough so I do a bit of <><>< at home so that's keeping me sort of active but I don't know how I had any time when I was working (laughter)because the house was clean, the washing and ironing was done everything was sorted you know, and ye I find myself now I've got so much work to do thinking when when where does the hours go?

## C

how did I fit work into this? yes.

## Karen

yes, yes how did you, my mate, she is 13 years older than me but I remember when she retired and she said I've got no time to do that "but you are off all day" "yes but I have got no time" and I'd say how can you have no time but it is true because before I know it

especially now in the winter when it gets dark at half past 3 or 4you don't want to be you know but I used to go training every night anyway but I go training through the day as well now 3 days a week three mornings a week I should say so by the time I've got up done a little bit, gone training, come back had a shower its lunch time anyway. So, the day is almost half you know erm but I smile to myself and think I I don't know how I manged to live before when I was holding down a full-time job but its I'm enjoying the non-pressure.

## C

yeh

## Karen

you know the the erm what was great as well was although my last day was the 30th of July my last day in uniform was the the 26th May.  And what was lovely was you know when you go on leave and you have a fab leave but then come near the end your thinking Aggh I've got to go back to work on Monday, I didn't, I didn't have that there was none of this I have to go back it was like 'yeehhh'.erm and it was so nice and and I keep having guilty pangs thinking I shouldn't be doing that and I'm thinking no you have worked hard for this give yourself a year, 18 mon you know in a years’ time I might be banging at the door saying right I need to go and work with somebody I need to go back and start working  5days a week, you know but as I said before my pension is there is not a need for me to do it I have a good way I can manage so actually you know it is quite nice to do something that I want to do not that I have to.  and that is a really nice feeling, and get paid for it, win win.

## C

exactly, its great erm.  So, do you think it has lived up to what you thought in terms of leaving?

## Karen

Erm its not been as worrying as I thought it might be I was a little bit worried my first my first pension erm was only about £1300 and I though ummm I've completely messed that up. Cause I thought it was going to be about 16 so and as it was I had forgot hadn't done a full month I'd only done 24 days so the next one was like alright because that extra £300 quid it’s a big chunk isn't it? you know

## C

yeh

## Karen

The only thing, but I am getting used to it now my my my fear over the last few months has been erm where is my next penny coming from, erm because you know I was so used to clearing just shy of £3,000 a month. You know what ever I wanted I could have erm and I lived nicely and I still live nicely but now I sort of sit and think do I need 3 joints of meat there is only me, no I've already got 3 joints in the freezer, stop it.  Stop buying you know erm but that was a little bit scary but I didn't know what was coming in but that was I think it was all 36 years I'd always known there was a wage coming in every month.  I am really quite good with money my father taught me books and everything erm unfortunately my ex-husband wasn't and when I went away on detachment and came back he had got us 13 grand in debt which was

## C

impressive

## Karen

yeh 20 years ago that was a lot of money.  It’s a lot of money now but I mean it was humungous so we got out of it but even though I was worried I still knew that every month there would be that pay check.

## C

yeh

## Karen

whereas that sort of thing and I had a fair amount of money in the bank.  I haven't now because of the extension and it’s all accounted for and when I look at how much it is going to cost me to its going to cost about 100 grand

## C

Really?

## Karen

The extension itself is about 45 for the bricks and mortar, but then it’s the flooring and I need new furniture and the en-suite and the plumbing I had a new boiler and windows and doors, it it all adds up.  But I've that money is set aside tis all there its already I just don't touch it.  It just means where I have been used to having a minimum of 20 thousand in the bank always I haven't go that now my bills sort of thing I know all my bills even if I don't work at all for a month my bills are paid for, my pension has paid for that.  And I still have £600 left but a hundred and 50 quid a week for food and clothes actually for me that is a lot of money you know

## C

yeh

## Karen

erm so that has started to ease off but that was the only that was the only that was the scary thing at first.

## C

yeh

## Karen

yeh but now I would still like to win the lottery don't get me wrong but you know but it so it means that all the work that I do now erm is pocket money and I am just keeping up my <><>< account and I won’t touch it and it will be just be there erm and I know I've got it there so if something drastic does happen I can go into tit.

## C

yeh mmm. Ok Well that is about everything?

## Karen

Oh, has it been useful

## C

Oh, yeh yeh definitely it’s been brilliant.  There has been a couple of standout things.  So, despite you being in a masculine, male dominated trade is that you you know rarely have you felt that was an issue and that was fantastic because there is this perception outside that the military is hugely overbearingly masculine and male and actually that wasn't my experience of it either and I tried to tell this to my supervisors and of course the Air Force is different to the Army.

## Karen

yes, yes definitely

## C

And erm pretty much everything that is written in academia is Army it is very Army dominated so you get this really masculine male perception of everything and I think the Air Force is more neutral than that

## Karen

yeh yeh

## C

And my supervisors will say to me but neutrality it’s not neutral Caroline it’s still male it’s still masculine hiding behind neutrality and sometimes it is, sometimes it is but a lot of times it isn't so

## Karen

you also you also come across those type of people

## C

of course

## Karen

and it’s funny you say that because the only time I did have any issues about being a female is when I dealt with the Army and I remember going to erm Army Barracks to do erm bowman training I think it was, my sergeant me a Warrant Officer and erm yes was a Warrant Officer and I took the Flight Sergeant with me.  This Army sergeant refused to look at me point blank and just dealt with my sergeant and it was like crack on then you know and afterwards he looked at me and I said “so in the Army then do you respect your Warrant Officers" "yeh" "What do you think this is?" and that was that again you know it was just because of that and then I walked out. Because I just thought and you are right the Army does have an issue I believe you know with that the Air Force, generally speaking as a rule there is a bit of banter that goes on both ways erm but you are accepted more I think as a female than you are and  a lot of people actually when I think back were inspired by the fact that I wasn't when I got promoted to warrant officer erm I was the only I was the third female warrant officer in the trade and I was the only female warrant officer at that time.  And there weren't a lot of female warrant officers and they would look and go you know how did you do it?

## C

yeh

## Karen

And then my mate got promoted which was great and then another female friend got promoted then another and another so on I I was given I was presented with a witches

broom when I was a flight sergeant as the most senior female in the trade (laughter) er and I kept it and then what I did at my Top Table I got it mounted on a piece of wood and then I had brass plaques made up 2 previous warrants officers made up, you know min and but it doesn't mat the rank is the thing I mean the next senior female could be a corporal.

## C

yes

## Karen

if everybody goes you know its that's being the most senior female within the trade and Mary my friend she's now got that in her office. Erm witches broom and transport you know.  So I have created now a legacy if you like something a tradition that can go on and what I did as well when I was at Waddington for my OC when he left I got a steering wheel made up and a plaque erm basically saying you know, chaps love him<><>< and he handed it over to the new OC MT so it sits in the OC MTs office so then they next new OC so again hopefully, it will probably die but it would be nice you know just to get passed on and passed on and just sit there erm and I think you know they are nice memories as well to have aren't they you know if the Air Force accepts it but we still in the Air Force if you think about it we still make a bit of a fuss about women either getting promoted or <><>< I can't remember her name who was it the first female she was an Air Rank and they made such a fuss about the fact she was an Air Rank and I remember thinking and what? Erm and then there was a female I think she was a police woman who got killed in Afghan and there was a big big splurge about it and I was thinking well hang on a minute, what about all the male so I think as human beings we like to put women in boxes as well

## C

yeh

## Karen

and do it so we tend we can as human being do that and say well it’s the fairer sex.  <><><><><><><

## C

You have got me thinking now that witches broom, so what did that witches broom represent then to you as a woman?

## Karen

transport.

## C

transport a mode of transport.

## Karen

yeh yeh yeh cause you are the wicked witch of the west.  sort of thing so I mean it was done in in in jest but it was quite it was a proper witches like a real real wicker, beautiful.

## C

yeh

## Karen

erm I'll send you a picture, but it was just I was presented it when I was on 2 MT was I most senior then? I'm not sure? Erm because unfortunately a friend of mine she died of cancer so then it obviously got given to me so it was a lot nicer when I presented it to somebody who was living you know what I mean that was a nice.  It was bitter sweet when I got it you know I was proud to receive it but also the only reason I received it was because my friend had died you know.  Erm but it was quite nice.  I don't even know how it happened or who started it off.  Erm but it’s nice to think that it will carry on and just yeh.

## C

But it is interesting isn't it because yes, it is a mode of transport and you were on 2MT but a witch is pretty much a negative female stereotype

## Karen

yeh yeh yeh

## C

But she is also a pretty powerful stereotype

## Karen

yeh yeh and its erm it is because I mean I'd like to know the theory the thought behind who ever created it in the first place.

## C

yeh

## Karen

and where it came from.  I like to think of it as you know the wooden broom stick and transport you know because I used to always turn around and say it’s alright I've got my own transport you know erm and make a laugh about it.  but yeh there is a there is a I mean you do get nice witches but you your perception of a witch on a broom stick is black hat green face and warts on her face and a black cat at the back so yeh its its out of everything it could have been a bike couldn't it but then that could have been even worse wouldn't it if it was a female on a bike.  (laughter) but yeh yeh that would definitely been a no no wouldn't it.  you will have to take that out of your recording.

## C

oh no.  That is staying in.  No, it’s interesting but you never took it as that anyway it didn’t mean anything negative to you it is a very positive

## Karen

yeh and its funny because you know all the stuff going on at the moment about the sexual harassment.  well I sort of look at it and think wow erm over my 36-year career I I'm very very tactile you know I always hug and everything but I am also aware of peoples when I am invading their space so I I can read people.  but I sort of sat there thinking wow I wonder if somebody could bring something up you know and it is it is the old line about the banter erm where do you draw the but there is also you have that emotional intelligence to read people to sort of and also if you have gone too far to apologise but also if you feel someone has gone too far to have the moral courage to turn round them and say I think you have over stepped the mark there.  Because if people don't know then they are going to carry on whatever it is they are doing not realising that it’s upsetting somebody.

## C

yeh

## Karen

and we have got to be careful that we don't create a nation of people that look for things just so they can get money because it’s an easy way out.  And also create because when I went back in last week one of my civvi drivers I was having a cup of tea and he lent behind me to put a tea bag in a bin and he went "oh I'd better be careful there" I went "why?" and he said "well I might of got too close to you and you might be suing me" and I thought well that all joking aside it could get to the point where people are so afraid to say anything to someone

## C

yeh

## Karen

in case and I think the military is renowned for their banter and their black humour and that is probably the only thing that keeps you sane is having that black humour and having the same chain of thoughts so you can look at someone don't say anything and burst out laughing because you know what they are thinking whether that be right or wrong you know. and I think we need to be a little bit careful that we are not we don't get to that point.  There is a line that people can blatantly cross but also, I think if it goes too far in the military it will ruin everything <><>< cause we need that banter, like when I just said that thing about the bike you and I neither one of us had to say anything but you knew exactly where I was coming from

## C

yeh

## Karen

It’s an old school thing you know.  Erm and its that and it’s just a little, a little bit scary but that is another why I actually like diversity and inclusion I'm quite sad I'd go and deliver that anywhere because it is such an important thing to be aware of it.  But to use it sensibly.

## C

yeh brilliant I think that just about covers everything, I am going to press stop on my recorder so I don't have to erm ...1:17:45