

IN MEMORY OF
CAPTAIN MARK HALE



**IN MEMORY OF
CAPTAIN MARK HALE**



BRENDA HALE

Interview by Katy Regan

Brenda, from Northern Ireland, is the widow of Captain Mark Hale, of 2nd Battalion The Rifles who was 42 when he was killed in an explosion whilst on patrol in Sangin on August 13th 2009.

One of my main memories of our holiday in Paris where the picture was taken was the cook in the bed and breakfast we were staying, coming out every morning and shouting about her croissants and coffee. For the first few days you just thought she was rude! Before realizing it was all part of this breakfast show and that she was actually a dragon with a warm heart. Mark loved it, because he was always one of those guys whose bark was much worse than his bite too. He was larger than life even at home; he was just the centre of our universe and all three of us adored him.

Mark and I met at a disco in my hometown of Bangor in 1985 when I was 16 and he was 17. He was on his first posting in Northern Ireland, which wasn't a good place to be a soldier at that time. He told me he was a fireman; but at 6ft 4in, a really short hair cut and a booming English voice - I knew he was a soldier. Nice girls didn't go out with soldiers, it was seen to be betraying your nationality and my parents were worried

that being involved with him could bring trouble to our door by the paramilitaries. He was in Northern Ireland for two years; when he was posted to Berlin. I think they hoped it would fizzle out but it never did, and we got married in 1987, when I was 19 and he was 20.

Mark was a prolific letter writer so we got to know each other through the written word. We fell out with letters, we made up with letters and this dynamic carried on throughout the 25 years we had together. If we were niggling about something there would be a card or a letter under our pillow.

He told me he loved me in his third letter. I was reading it on a train to Belfast and I went "yippee!" and everyone on the train turned and looked and I was like "he loves me!" it felt like I'd drunk a bottle of champagne - everything was just going pop.

Tori, our eldest daughter came along in 1993 and I remember Mark, shaven-head, built like a brick shed, holding her in his arms in Ulster Hospital and crying, because he was based

in Germany, but was on a 6 month tour of Belfast with his regiment and wasn't sure when he'd next see her. That made me cry then, because I realized how much it hurt him to be away from us. It made us realize how tight our family unit was.

It took 8 years for Alix to come along. We were in London at the time, but after 9/11 army life changed dramatically for many families. The boys were always away; Mark was posted to Iraq in 2006 and then in 2009, to Afghanistan. He'd done tours of Northern Ireland, the Falklands and Bosnia but this was his first tour to Afghanistan. Tori was 15 and Alix, 7.

It was immediate heightened fear and anxiety. I just knew this tour was different. Mark said they were expecting huge casualties. He was tying up all his loose ends and saying goodbye to people, which he'd never done before other postings. We never said it outright but we both had a gut feeling that we'd reached the end of our line.

I'd clean to block out the anxiety. Friends said they'd

never seen me so anxious. We were continually watching the news, but that wasn't good because Two Rifles were the hardest hit regiment the whole time of Afghanistan and 2009 was our worst year - we were being slaughtered.

We had a big dinner party before Mark left and 3 of the people round that table were dead within a few months and Mark was one of them.

He came home on leave in July but he wasn't himself - one of his mates had been killed; the guys were all petrified. Nobody talks about these young men - they're not phoning in sick or playing on their X-box, they're putting their boots on and going out there, petrified of being killed. Mark said they would pray every time before they went out on patrol.

One day during that leave Mark learned that they'd lost five guys from his regiment in one go. I grabbed his face, I said "you need to stay with us, for the last few days" but from then on, he wasn't really there, he just wanted to get back to the boys.

He went back on July 17th. I spoke to him for the last time on the morning of August 12th 2009 - the day before he was killed. It was a Wednesday and he always called Sundays and Wednesday and I said, "can you phone Sunday as usual?" and he said "it shouldn't be an issue." I said, "Mark just stay in for me" because his job was actually office-based but he always wanted to go out on patrol to help. "Staying in is boring" he said and my heart banged into my mouth. The phone call never came; whereas the knock on the door did.

The next morning when there was no daily email from him, I just started to shake. I got the girls to where they needed to be - Tori was doing work experience on a newspaper and Alix was in summer camp - but by the time I got home, I still hadn't heard from Mark so I sent an email saying, "I'm really, worried, please email me as soon as the communications are up, I love you so much." Then I heard a knock at the door and I just went cold. There was a man and

a woman there but I just shut the door in their faces and locked it. Eventually they managed to usher me into the sitting room and said, very bluntly: "Captain Mark Hale was killed today at 10 past 9 in Afghanistan" and I went, "no he wasn't, because I spoke to him yesterday and he's phoning me on Sunday" and they went "no he's definitely dead."

My teeth started to chatter; they chattered for over a year and a half, I couldn't stop. I knew I had to tell the girls but was trying to delay it; I knew I had two hours in which their lives would still be OK. When I went to pick up Tori from the newspaper, she saw me getting out of the car and I said "sweetheart, I need to speak to you" and she started to scream, "not my daddy, not my daddy."

We're a Christian family and that night we were able to pray and I'm so glad we did because I don't know how families who don't have faith, cope. We said, "Jesus thank you for taking Daddy into heaven" and as much as you don't want him there, at least you know he is there and that really helped.

Mark was killed retrieving soldiers from an IED blast. His job was office bound, the only reason he'd gone on patrol was because he wanted to assess the trauma risk and help the blokes. They were checking a mosque for IEDs when the first explosion went off. Three soldiers including 23 year old Matthew Hatton were hit and Mark and Rifleman Daniel Wild, who was only 19 cleared a path to try and get them to safety, but then Wild stepped on the second IED which killed him and Matthew outright and blew Mark over a wall. They managed to keep him alive until they got him into Bastion but he then died from blood loss.

The next day the army come round with the insurance forms. It was then they told me that because Mark died at 10 past 9 in the morning he wouldn't get paid a full day's wage, and I said "what do you mean?" And they said "well technically he didn't turn up for work" and I said, "no because he was bleeding to death in Camp Bastion."

He was the longest serving soldier to be killed in

Afghanistan, he served for 26 years and this is how they treated him? How they valued his life? It's a national disgrace. I kicked up such a big fuss about it, that they've changed that now and you do get a full day's wage - which is jolly good of them. But to think that at 9am in the morning on 13th August Mark's wages were going in, and by 10 past 9 they weren't, so that's how quickly your life changes. People in Whitehall actually ask the time of death so they know when to stop the money. Now I know the MOD have to save money but to deny a soldier the rest of his day's wages when a window cleaner, taxi driver, or a tube driver, would get it, beggars belief.

On top of that, they lost his will and then tried to tell me that Mark didn't do a will, but I knew he had. They said it would have to go into probate. I just got really cross. My local MP, Jeffrey Donaldson, called round three weeks after Mark was killed and said can I help in any way and I was just sitting crying and I said "I have no money, none even to pay probate."

Jeffrey arranged for me to see the then Secretary of State for Defence, Des Brown. So I went into Whitehall in the April knowing there was going to be an election in 2011, so I knew he was coming to the end of his job and he said “what can I do to help?” He sat and he cried as I told him my story about Mark and the girls and he promised a review into how families were looked after under the military covenant and I will say this, that he began that review even though he lost his job 6 weeks later.

After the review began, I was getting requests to come to Whitehall and speak looking at how families were looked after post death in action and Jeffrey, who had got me the visit to Whitehall asked me at Christmas 2010 would I consider standing in the upcoming Stormont elections, to become a Member of the Northern Irish Assembly for Lagan Valley, which is the area just outside Belfast.

I'd always been political. I almost felt Mark at my shoulder saying “why are you even thinking about this?” There's

a large military community live in Northern Ireland and I got elected and I've carried the cause of army families as far as I can. I've taken it to the Prime Minister and Lord Ashcroft has been a great supporter in trying to get things done, and also the military charities - the Soldiers' Charity and especially for me, the ABF who agreed immediately to take care of Alexandra's prep fees until she finished school, so I knew she would have a school with her friends with good pastoral care.

I've been able to get people to look behind the uniform because they're not just soldiers they're husbands, fathers, sons, daughters and within Northern Ireland I suppose, it's given the military community a voice because we do live under the radar because there's still a high dissident threat.

I gave the most important thing that I had and it was Mark, and Mark knew I was fiery and actually on his next of kin form he wrote at the top, 'Caution: fiery Irish woman.' I guess he'd seen that fire and I've been able to use to shout and scream about

things that need to change.

Mark had a full military funeral and is buried in the graveyard of the church we attend. On Remembrance Day we go there; Alix or Tori like to wear their dad's medals. On Mark's Birthday, we put candles on a cake and wish Daddy a Happy Birthday in heaven. We just try to focus on the fact that he was with us, and that we were really, really lucky. I was lucky to marry my soul-mate; I met him at 16 and I suppose as a Christian, I would say that God knew I was only going to have him until I was 40.

I don't think about the future I just get through today. The first couple of years the urge to go to him was very hard to deny; he couldn't come to me so I'll go to him, was my thinking and I would plan well, I couldn't leave the girls so I'd take the girls. You don't live, you survive. Because we were together so long, all my adult life, learning to breathe without him is really difficult but if you've had a love like that, you have to believe, there's love enough for a lifetime and he

would love us beyond death and this is what we're living on now.

I had an incident about two years ago, where I lost the plot. I woke up one day and thought Mark's dead and I have to tell my children. The girls weren't there and the teeth chattering started and I was being sick. Somewhere in the back of my head I knew they already knew but I could not bring myself to a place where I believed it. It was horrific. There were no counselors around so I lifted the phone and called an army friend and said you need to help me.

I think the fact I have to speak about Mark a lot in my job helps because my favourite subject is Mark, and it has been from the day I met him. But also, he loved his guys and I feel that I'm trying to look after his guys the way that he did and that's my way of keeping his legacy alive. That's my impetus for doing everything. I have all this love and what am I going to do with it? So I channel it by looking after the people that he was trying to look after the day that he was killed.

To make a donation please
go to www.soldierscharity.org



TOP

Before: Brenda. "Me and my man, Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris, 2008."

BOTTOM

After: Same location, 26/07/2015



Before They Were Fallen deals with remembrance. Louis Quail and Katy Regan use the power of photography and testimony together, to link memory, the passing of time and loss to create a body of work which pays tribute all those British soldiers who gave their lives in the Afghanistan conflict.



B E F O R E

T H E Y

W E R E

F A L L E N

LOUIS QUAIL

**WORDS BY
KATY REGAN**