



BEYOND LOSS
Susan Phoenix became suicidal after her husband died in the Chinook
JUSTIN SUTCLIFFE

A spirit risen from the ashes

The pilots of the Chinook that crashed in 1994 killing 29 people were exonerated last week. The widow of one victim tells her story



Jonathan Owen
meets
Susan Phoenix

You could be forgiven for thinking that Susan Phoenix does not have much to laugh about. She lost the love of her life, the man she calls her "twin soul", 17 years ago. But she does laugh. A lot.

Chuckles and giggles from the 62-year-old punctuate our conversation as we sit in the courtyard of Chippenham's Angel Hotel. The venue is aptly named – given that the psychologist credits her belief in angels and the spiritual world for lifting the grief-induced depression that took her to the brink of suicide.

Ian Phoenix was one of 29 people who died in the Chinook helicopter crash on the Mull of Kintyre on 2 June 1994. The 51-year-old detective superintendent was the head

of the Royal Ulster Constabulary's counterterrorism unit, and his fellow passengers were the elite of Britain's counterterrorism effort against the IRA.

Shortly after leaving Belfast, en route to a security conference near Inverness, the helicopter crashed into the side of a mountain on the Mull of Kintyre. There were no survivors. An RAF inquiry blamed the pilots, Flight Lieutenants Richard Cook and Jonathan Tapper, accusing them of "gross negligence" for flying too low and too fast. It sparked a 17-year battle by the pilots' families and campaigners to overturn the decision, spurred on by growing evidence of serious technical problems with the Chinook fleet. Last week, the Secretary of State for Defence, Liam Fox, publicly apologised to the pilots' families after an independent inquiry exonerated them.

In Britain to help her daughter-in-law with the grandchildren during the holidays, the news took Dr Phoenix, who now lives in Spain, by surprise. "That these boys have finally been cleared is wonderful. I welled up, I was shocked at myself. I think I cried with relief because their families have suffered so much."

While the cause of the crash remains a mystery, her theory is straightforward. "I think it was faulty kit. Pure and simple." She says there



SUSAN PHOENIX
Widow of Ian Phoenix, who died in the crash

remain "too many question marks" over the crash. "I want the people covering up to stand up and say, yes, we should have done something more."

Dr Phoenix's love for her late husband shines through as she tells me how they met in Aldershot when she was a 19-year-old army nurse and he a 25-year-old paratrooper. And she beams with pride as she recalls the last time she saw him, more than 25 years later: "I can still see his back as he walked to that helicopter. I watched him for a while ... I remember thinking he was a good-looking man because he was always tall and slim."

After the crash, she went downhill. "It wasn't until year three that I went seriously down the tubes. I

suddenly thought 'life isn't going to get any better'." Her children would help to raise her spirits by reminding her of their dad's expression "keep low, keep moving" and "don't look back".

A turning point came when a friend suggested she go on an "angel course". "I said, you must be joking ... when I went it wasn't anything to do with angels, it was to do with being in touch with energies." I ask if she became interested in the spiritual world as a way of coping with loss. "Well, people will say, here's this weird loopy widow that got into angels to cope. But Ian and I both saw spirits as children, so we both accepted there was something out there."

Then she tells of a visit to the crash site she made years later. "I heard him in my head say 'you need to get some proof and evidence'. I saw a vision of all these guys walking – it was like a hologram – and they went up over the top of the hill. And then I heard him saying, 'Are you ready for coming over?', which I presume means are you ready for dying. And I said 'no', and he said 'Atta, girl, there's stuff to do!'"

Writing about her husband's work, based on his diaries, provided some relief. Later, she wrote a book charting how she survived the grief.

Talking excitedly about electro-magnetic auras, Dr Phoenix half laughs at herself. But there are

poignant moments, particularly when talking about the crash.

The Phoenix family are close. Dr Phoenix regularly stays with both her children: her 38-year-old son, a pilot in the RAF, in Gloucestershire, and her 43-year-old daughter, a former BBC journalist now in France.

They are not shocked by her spiritual beliefs. She describes how she took an electro-magnetic picture of her son. "His aura was a beautiful blue and purple, and he had a white column of light just beside him. I showed him the photo and said what do you make of that? And he said, 'That'll be my dad, won't it? Because I can feel him beside me when I fly into Iraq. I can feel him in the cockpit.'"

She is no longer trapped by the sadness that dominated her life. "I was alone for 12 years. I am still alone, but for 12 years I didn't think about dating and such things." She chuckles, adding: "No, I'm not in a relationship ... I'm too much of a free spirit now."

Paying tribute to her husband, she says: "When you've spent more than 25 years with somebody, loving them very much every day, they are part of you. They make you who you are."

She will never stop missing him. "I don't think it ever goes away, but it doesn't mean it stops you living. I have enjoyed a lot of things in my life, I'm still enjoying them and I know there are many more things to come."