

## ALAN PRECIOUS

Edited transcript of a recording of Alan Precious, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee at Sandford, Cumbria, on 29th October 2010. Transcribed by Andy Smith, 10th September 2011. BAS Reference AD6-24-1-95. Footnote added p. 16, 6 April 2021.

Track 1 [0:00:02] Chris Eldon Lee: *This is Alan Precious, recorded individually at Sandford in Cumbria, by Chris Eldon Lee, on the 29th of October 2010. Alan Precious.*

Track 1 [0:00:14] Chris Eldon Lee: *Alan, I want to talk to you mainly about your two trips after Hope Bay, but there is one question that remains from last night and that is about eating dog's liver. How did that come about?*

Track 1 [0:00:27] Alan Precious: It came about because some of the dogs and puppies had to be put down because they were runts or because of some illness in one of the dogs, something like that. Julian I think and Paul Massey perhaps, no I think this was in Julian's first year, I am not quite sure about that ...

Track 1 [0:01:00] Chris Eldon Lee: *This is Julian Taylor?*

Track 1 [0:01:01] Alan Precious: Mm. Did an autopsy and took out the liver of the older animal – I think it was – and brought it in and cooked it. It was cooked and we all ate bits of it with the rest of our lunch, and it tasted like other kinds of animal liver.

Track 1 [0:01:28] Chris Eldon Lee: *Did you feel comfortable about that?*

Track 1 [0:01:32] Alan Precious: It was an experiment. I think we probably thought we were doing it partly for science or partly because it was something to eat.

Track 1 [0:01:49] Chris Eldon Lee: *What about dog management generally, because the survival rate of dogs was about 50% wasn't it?*

Track 1 [0:01:56] Alan Precious: I do not know about that.

Track 1 [0:02:00] Chris Eldon Lee: *Well there were quite a lot put down at birth, mainly the females?*

Track 1 [0:02:03] Alan Precious: Yes, that it true. Death at birth was probably the biggest thing and I remember later at Halley Bay I looked after the first pups that were born there. I seem to remember that we actually put some of them down because we did not want so many bitches. I think that was the policy at Hope Bay too. We did not want all the bitches because it was thought they were not as good at pulling a sledge as the male dogs were. Usually there were probably eight male dogs and only one bitch in a team: one bitch in the front pair to encourage the males at the back to go forward. Yes I had forgotten that actually, that we did put down a lot at birth. I do not think many actually died naturally at birth; they were put down, just not kept.

Track 1 [0:03:35] Chris Eldon Lee: *What was the feeling about that because the bond between a Fid and the dogs was quite strong, wasn't it?*

Track 1 [0:03:43] Alan Precious: Yes, it was.

Track 1 [0:03:44] Chris Eldon Lee: *Well this goes against the intuition, doesn't it?*

Track 1 [0:03:47] Alan Precious: Yes, I can remember Derek Clarke commenting on this, saying 'Poor little thing. You are not going to be allowed to live.' So there was a feeling, yes, that it was a shame, but it might have been a reflection on the times of the world generally, that if you were not going to be any good, there was no point in your being left alive, sort of thing.

Track 1 [0:04:23] Chris Eldon Lee: *A kind of post-war hard harshness?*

Track 1 [0:04:29] Alan Precious: I do not know, possibly. It is not altogether natural although in Nature again it probably does happen, doesn't it? 'Nature red in tooth and claw.'

Track 1 [0:04:46] Chris Eldon Lee: *Mary Webb?* [Transcriber comment: actually a quote from Tennyson. Andy Smith]

Track 1 [0:04:48] Alan Precious: Mmm, yes.

Track 2 [0:04:53] Chris Eldon Lee: *And within the last decade you had all lived, or even fought in a war where death was fairly commonplace?*

Track 2 [0:04:59] Alan Precious: Death was occurring often, yes. It was, yes.

Track 2 [0:05:02] Chris Eldon Lee: *Were there some Fids who could not bring themselves to witness this, or help?*

Track 2 [0:05:09] Alan Precious: I am not sure. It was not everybody's job of course. I think it was Derek's partly, and so the others would not be involved personally in carrying it out. They would know of it going on but not being involved in actually doing it.

Track 2 [0:05:33] Chris Eldon Lee: *Right, and do you know how they were put down?*

Track 2 [0:05:37] Alan Precious: Usually drowning, I think. Yes, drowning.

Track 2 [0:05:44] Chris Eldon Lee: *Let us leave that there if we may. Thank you very much for answering those points. It is something that I have asked a few times and got quite strong answers from people.*

Track 2 [0:05:55] Alan Precious: I was going to say, you need to ask other people as well.

Track 2 [0:05:58] Chris Eldon Lee: *Don't worry. You did your two years at Hope Bay, and then you came back to England?*

Track 2 [0:06:06] Alan Precious: Yes.

Track 2 [0:06:07] Chris Eldon Lee: *And, as we heard in the previous recording, you had to go back to the bank.*

Track 2 [0:06:10] Alan Precious: Yes.

Track 2 [0:06:11] Chris Eldon Lee: *Which must have been a bit frustrating, mustn't it?*

Track 2 [0:06:13] Alan Precious: It did not have any effect because I knew that I was going to be going South again in six months time, and I needed to do something, obviously, to earn some money whilst I was back at home. So no, that was a good point of being a civil servant, I think.

Track 2 [0:06:39] Chris Eldon Lee: *A bit of a respite for you?*

Track 2 [0:06:41] Alan Precious: Yes.

Track 2 [0:06:42] Chris Eldon Lee: *And when you went South again, you went to Admiralty Bay, and this time you were promoted?*

Track 2 [0:06:48] Alan Precious: Yes, I was, yes.

Track 2 [0:06:50] Chris Eldon Lee: *How did that happen?*

Track 2 [0:05:52] Alan Precious: Unexpectedly. My feeling is that on the way down we were being assessed by the ship's captain, Norman Brown, and so on. Plus they had my record and our records from previous two years down there. They needed someone to go to Admiralty Bay. They needed someone as a Base Leader. My companions who went with me were all entirely new Fids. None of the Fids at the base already there were staying – it was a complete changeover. So we were an entirely new 'family' of Fids at Admiralty Bay. We originally were going to have an extra radio operator because the island was going to be re-surveyed. Also, Hugh Noble was going down to do glaciology which meant spending a lot of time on the West Stenhouse Glacier, and very regular visits to the glacier, so you needed two or three people, three people at least: two people to accompany him each time he went onto the glacier. Very shortly after we got there, FIDS decided that the radio control, which was at Lockroy, was going to come to Admiralty Bay because they said the radio traffic interfered with their ionospheric programme.

Track 2 [0:09:08] Chris Eldon Lee: *Yes, and vice versa?*

Track 2 [0:09:11] Alan Precious: Yes. This was a saddening thing for me. I did not want anything to do with control radio.

Track 2 [0:09:21] Chris Eldon Lee: *Why not?*

Track 2 [0:09:22] Alan Precious: Well because it meant taking up people at the base. We had to have the chief radio operator collecting and we had a second radio operator to take over from him occasionally. It seemed to me to interfere with a programme of

exploration that we were supposed to be doing. That was my feeling. I suggested that they should put it at Deception Island instead.

Track 3 [0:10:09] Chris Eldon Lee: *There was negotiation, was there?*

Track 3 [0:10:11] Alan Precious: There was a suggestion, which was quickly killed by saying it would interfere with the flying programme there, which of course it would. So there we were; we had it, and we got on with it. I was not interested in the radio side of the business myself, other than the necessary scheds for weather reporting and the usual messages.

Track 3 [0:10:48] Chris Eldon Lee: *However you had to put up with it, didn't you?*

Track 3 [0:10:55] Alan Precious: Yes, we had to put up with it.

Track 3 [0:10:56] Chris Eldon Lee: *Did you resent it for all you time there, or did you ...?*

Track 3 [0:10:57] Alan Precious: Oh, no no.

Track 3 [0:10:58] Chris Eldon Lee: *You got used to it?*

Track 3 [0:10:59] Alan Precious: Just got on with it, you know.

Track 3 [0:11:01] Chris Eldon Lee: *Didn't it also mean you were the centre of gossip?*

Track 3 [0:11:02] Alan Precious: In what way?

Track 3 [0:11:06] Chris Eldon Lee: *Well, you were aware of all the messages going to and from everywhere.*

Track 3 [0:11:09] Alan Precious: Oh, well the radio operator was. Occasionally he came out and told us things, but I certainly never scrutinised all the signals that came through; not by any means, no.

Track 3 [0:11:24] Chris Eldon Lee: *OK. How were you made Base Leader? What was the procedure?*

Track 3 [0:11:29] Alan Precious: Well, it was put to me that this was ... They had decided that this was what they would like me to do, Frank Elliott and the Governor I suppose.

Track 3 [0:11:43] Chris Eldon Lee: *So you were in the Falklands at the time, were you?*

Track 3 [0:11:46] Alan Precious: Yes, this was as we arrived from the *Biscoe*. We all went up to Government House (FIDS Office) for various bits of documentation and so on, and it was put to me then by, I think it was by Frank Elliott. I am not absolutely certain whether it was Frank or Johnny Green, but it was put to me, and I could not see any reason to object. It was a surprise, and I accepted, yes.

Track 3 [0:12:20] Chris Eldon Lee: *And there was a ceremony?*

Track 3 [0:12:23] Alan Precious: There was a ceremony of being sworn in as a local magistrate. I think I had already signed the Official Secrets Act several times by then, and that was it. I was told who my companions were going to be and we all gathered together down on the deck of the *Biscoe*. We already knew each other from travelling down, so we thought 'Oh, well I think we can all get on with each other.' as indeed we could. I think it allowed some people to say, for instance: I did hear someone saying 'Well I would like to go to so and so base.' And I heard someone else say 'Well if he is going there, I am not going there.' [laughs] So yes it was, it was a good sorting out process, yes it was.

Track 3 [0:13:35] Chris Eldon Lee: *Did you have any particular feelings when you were standing there being invested, or whatever the phrase is?*

Track 3 [0:13:42] Alan Precious: A feeling of responsibility, yes certainly, and wondering exactly what it might be like to be a magistrate. Fortunately I never had to practise doing anything of the kind. I already knew, of course, of the business at Deception, where they had had to have a court of enquiry in which the base leader obviously was a magistrate, as was Captain Johnson.

Track 3 [0:14:21] Chris Eldon Lee: *This was after the death of Farrant?*

Track 3 [0:14:22] Alan Precious: Yes. So I certainly hoped I would never have to do anything of the kind like that. Part of being, also, sworn in, was as Local Receiver of Wrecks and we never had any wrecks that I could receive or obtain any (what do you call it), not contraband but bounty from something that had been wrecked, no.

Track 4 [0:14:58] Chris Eldon Lee: *Was there a Bible involved in this process?*

Track 4 [0:15:03] Alan Precious: Yes, of course, yes. 'I swear by Almighty God ...' Yes.

Track 4 [0:15:07] Chris Eldon Lee: *So what was your style, then? Did you adopt a particular approach, having been under two base leaders at Hope Bay, you had something to compare yourself to?*

Track 4 [0:15:16] Alan Precious: Yes. I knew that I was nothing like Bill Anderson because he was trained to be a manager. I was probably nearer to Bill Turner, I suppose. I think you might get a better picture of what I was like by asking some of my former colleagues.

Track 4 [0:15:45] Chris Eldon Lee: *My question though was: did you consciously adopt a certain style? Did you have a relaxed hands-off style or were you a micro-manager?*

Track 4 [0:15:53] Alan Precious: What I think I tried to do was to make it possible to ... I tried to help the specialists such as Hugh Noble (the glaciologist) and Graham Davey (the surveyor). I tried to make it possible for them to do their jobs well, to

support them, to make sure for instance that Graham could get out wherever he wanted to go, and that he would be supported by me and others. I would see that he always had plenty of stores so that he could carry on working.

Track 4 [0:16:40] Chris Eldon Lee: *So the science came first, science and surveys?*

Track 4 [0:16:42] Alan Precious: I think so, yes.

Track 4 [0:16:44] Chris Eldon Lee: *You mentioned a little while ago that the island was to be resurveyed. I am wondering why there was a need to resurvey it?*

Track 4 [0:16:51] Alan Precious: It was in connection with the aerial survey that was going on, the FIDASE aerial survey done by Huntings. They were doing aerial mapping, aerial photography, and the job of Graham Davey was to fix certain points on the ground, which he did by star sight and triangulation, which is (as you probably know) a very slow business. Early in my time there, four of us went to nearby Nelson Island, so that Graham could triangulate from Duthoit Point to Harmony Bay, and this involved him and us planting stakes in the ice, which he would survey from Duthoit Point. I often think that from above, what the two pairs of us were doing must have looked like a ritual dance because we were sledging first this way towards each other then away, and then coming back towards each other again, all the way from Edgell Bay to Harmony Cove.

Track 4 [0:18:27] Chris Eldon Lee: *Like two swans mating? A mating ritual?*

Track 4 [0:18:29] Alan Precious: Yes, something like that, yes. Later we had one team of dogs there and one dog sledge. They were not able to be used a great deal because all summer long there was no sea ice and there was just shingle on the shore, so you could not really drag a sledge on shingle. But we discovered a way up onto the icecap and we backpacked tons of stores up there, and dragged the sledge and the dogs up. So that we made a couple of dog sledge runs from there along towards the end of Ezcurra Inlet and Potter Cove. Graham and Robin Stephens climbed up the hill – it was called Three Buttresses or something like that – quite steep hills. [Transcriber comment: Three Brothers Hill, according to the Antarctic Placenames Database. Andy Smith] They took sightings from there, and linked up with Edgell, Nelson Island.

Track 5 [0:19:55] Chris Eldon Lee: *So the sledging was not anything like as adventurous or as satisfying as ...?*

Track 5 [0:19:59] Alan Precious: It wasn't. There was no such thing as that you could do a hundred miles a day or anything like that. You could not do long distances dog sledging. It was more that we had to backpack and manhaul – slower business altogether and a different business altogether. Yes.

Track 5 [0:20:24] Chris Eldon Lee: *You had FIDASE personnel on base with you?*

Track 5 [0:20:29] Alan Precious: Yes we did, yes: Jim Rennie (a former Fid), John Cheal and Colin Brown. They were there along with someone whose name I forget, who was a member of Huntings Aero Services. They did some quick sledging routes and manhauling routes. They also had a rubber boat which I do not think they used

very often, but they had a kind of skiff, I think it was ex-army one of these collapsible dinghy kind of things, with an Atco lawnmower engine on the back. We also, of course, had the two 12-foot wooden dinghies and together we did quite a lot of boating, really, in the area. I cannot quite remember how long they were there.

Track 5 [0:21:45] Chris Eldon Lee: *They did not stay for the winter then?*

Track 5 [0:21:50] Alan Precious: No, they just did the time they needed to do their own theodolite work. I remember Jim Rennie climbed Ternyck Needle, and took me up behind him, twice, which was a very shaley sort of volcanic core I think. We went to the top of it and he took sightings on Bridgeman Island and various points around.

Track 5 [0:22:30] Chris Eldon Lee: *So it sounds like you had about a dozen men in the summer?*

Track 5 [0:22:34] Alan Precious: Oh yes, more than a dozen. The permanent lot was eight.

Track 5 [0:22:42] Chris Eldon Lee: *And that was because it was IGY year so you had rather more than Admiralty Bay would normally have?*

Track 5 [0:22:48] Alan Precious: Yes, that is right, we did.

Track 5 [0:22:49] Chris Eldon Lee: *How did the activities of IGY actually impinge on your routine at Admiralty Bay?*

Track 5 [0:22:56] Alan Precious: I would say it was a major part.

Track 5 [0:22:59] Chris Eldon Lee: *Really?*

Track 5 [0:22:59] Alan Precious: Yes, because certainly Hugh Noble's glaciology programme was part of a worldwide study of glaciers and what was happening to them and his work was very interesting. We planted flags on various lines across the glacier, and each ten days or so we would travel out and measure what had happened. He also took sightings along the ice cliff to check how much had gone in the season, the melting season. Also, he and I and Robin Stephens dug a deep firn pit in the upper part of the glacier from which you could check the temperatures as we went down and the condition of the ice: whether it was melted together and so on. Rather like the business of tree rings where a wide ring I think means a hot summer and the nearer together, colder seasons, something like that. But obviously you would have to speak to him to get a more scientific picture of that.

Track 5 [0:24:38] Chris Eldon Lee: *So compared to Hope Bay, where you were very isolated, suddenly here you were part of an Antarctic-wide initiative, really, with much more communications?*

Track 5 [0:24:51] Alan Precious: Well I don't look at it that way, no. In a way we were more isolated than Hope Bay because we did not have any neighbours. We had occasional visitors – Chilean ships came in sometimes and there were Argentinian ships in the vicinity. In fact also they had a couple of people on Dufayel Island I think

in Ezcurra Inlet doing geology, something like that, who we did not know were there until the first mate of the *Shackleton* told us. He went ashore and gave them a Protest Note. [laughs]

Track 6 [0:25:43] Chris Eldon Lee: *The work you were doing on the glaciers and ice movement and so on, did any of the results surprise you?*

Track 6 [0:25:54] Alan Precious: No. They did not surprise me at the time, no. I found them very interesting and I may not have been sufficiently knowledgeable to judge what significance anything might have. I just looked at them and found them very interesting really. When there was a melt it did not occur to me that it might be part of a more permanent (in inverted commas) “melt” or “climate change”. I was not sufficiently aware of such an idea. Later when I went to Halley Bay I read about climate change and I have been aware of it ever since.

Track 6 [0:27:12] Chris Eldon Lee: *Right, so by the time you got to Halley in '61, the phrase “climate change” was in the vocabulary, was it?*

Track 6 [0:27:23] Alan Precious: I do not think it was in the general vocabulary by any means.

Track 6 [0:27:28] Chris Eldon Lee: *But the scientists were talking about it?*

Track 6 [0:27:29] Alan Precious: Scientists should have been. I read about it in a very good book by a German meteorologist. I cannot remember his name but the book was called *Earth's Envelope* and this was very instructive to me about the atmosphere and the great value of the rain forests as carbon sinks, so that nowadays it hurts me when I hear of the rain forests being chopped down.

Track 6 [0:28:07] Chris Eldon Lee: *But back at Admiralty Bay, the measurement of the ice movements – that was purely to find out? It was not because anybody was suspicious of any large scale change?*

Track 6 [0:28:19] Alan Precious: Yes, that is right. It was to do with how quickly it built up and how it went down. Similarly, at the same time, when the sea ice formed, we measured every day I think, or every other day, the thickness of the ice. We had a handmade wooden thing, like a pole with a shoe on the end, which we put through a hole and brought up to the underneath edge of the ice, and measured how thick it was. So that was quite an interesting way of doing things in connection with ice.

Track 6 [0:29:08] Chris Eldon Lee: *What else can you tell me about your time at Admiralty Bay? I gather there were one or two rather interesting boating trips.*

Track 6 [0:29:16] Alan Precious: Yes, at least two. With the FIDASE people, we were travelling across to what I called Tern Coast, because the terns used to fly there and it was not terribly far from Ternyck Needle. We got over halfway and the Seagull engine suddenly stopped. It was out of petrol. Adrian Wensley-Walker who was an excellent boatman refilled the tank with petrol but the plugs had got wet and it would not start, so he had to take them out and dry them. By this time we were in a strong current heading out towards the point opposite Point Thomas, heading out to sea.

Track 7 [0:30:35] Alan Precious: Innocently my thoughts were on these other people from a few years previously who had had to spend a night there. Point Hennequin is what I am talking about. Jim Rennie and his crew came after us in the collapsible canvas boat with the Atco lawnmower thing on the back. They came towards us and they were coming straight at us and the Atco lawnmower thing would only turn in an enormous circle; you could not make a tight turn with it. So I thought 'We are going to crash in a minute.' Anyway they just scraped past us without hitting us and we continued to drift and then suddenly the engine burst into life. So we were rescued. We got back to shore.

Track 7 [0:31:44] Chris Eldon Lee: *So you were not rescued by a lawnmower, then?*

Track 7 [0:31:46] Alan Precious: No. We got onto the shore and carried on with our business of lugging stores up the hill and helping Jim and his party.

Track 7 [0:31:58] Chris Eldon Lee: *Did you life flash before you?*

Track 7 [0:32:00] Alan Precious: No. I had a feeling of great frustration; that is all.

Track 7 [0:32:06] Chris Eldon Lee: *When something like that happened, as Base Leader would you discuss it with the team afterwards; say 'This is how we make sure it does not happen again.'*

Track 7 [0:32:15] Alan Precious: No, I do not think so. I always tried to take precautions and I believe in the Base Leader's Manual, I am not absolutely certain, but I believe it may suggest that when you are out in a boat with the Seagull engine, have the spare Seagull engine in the boat with you. Well I am quite sure we never did that. We had them on separate dinghies. I do not know anyone who might have followed that advice.

Track 7 [0:32:59] Chris Eldon Lee: *What was the second dodgy boating moment?*

Track 7 [0:33:06] Alan Precious: The second dodgy one was with Adrian Wensley-Walker. We had been over to Point Thomas, and also further up into Ezcurra Inlet, taking stores in support of Graham Davey's survey. We came back and we were very close to the ice cliffs that lead up towards Cape Crépin, and the sea became very very choppy. Also a strongish wind heading straight at us which was lifting the front of the boat completely out of the water. So I had to climb forward and sit in the bows of the boat, and each time we rose up over a wave, I had to plonk down to try and get it down again. We must have gone through that for a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes, something like that, and then, all of a sudden, we came completely out of it into more or less a flat calm. So this was obviously a local wind, and the sea obviously pushing up against the ice cliffs and bouncing back again, causing this choppiness. I have likened it to the upside-down bit of an egg box, like little hillocks we were in amongst all the time.

Track 7 [0:34:48] Chris Eldon Lee: *Little pyramids all around you?*

Track 7 [0:34:51] Alan Precious: Yes. That is right. I have never seen a sea like it anywhere in any other situation.

Track 8 [0:34:58] Chris Eldon Lee: *And so you were using your body as human ballast?*

Track 8 [0:35:01] Alan Precious: Yes.

Track 8 [0:35:02] Chris Eldon Lee: *And was that something that you read in a manual or was it just something that came to you at the moment?*

Track 8 [0:35:06] Alan Precious: It was something that Adrian probably had a lot to do with because he was a boatman, and he was a good boatman. So that is what I did.

Track 8 [0:35:19] Chris Eldon Lee: *'I have got some news for you Alan. This is what you do.'*?

Track 8 [0:35:21] Alan Precious: Yes.

Track 8 [0:35:22] Chris Eldon Lee: *You must have got soaked?*

Track 8 [0:35:23] Alan Precious: Yes, fairly wet.

Track 8 [0:35:26] Chris Eldon Lee: *May we move on to Halley if we may, because you did that year at Admiralty Bay, then again you came home, and I think again back to the Post Office Savings Bank?*

Track 8 [0:35:37] Alan Precious: Yes, that is right.

Track 8 [0:35:38] Chris Eldon Lee: *So what brought about the third term?*

Track 8 [0:35:41] Alan Precious: I think it was something to do with: I was a bit unsatisfied with what I was doing really, not getting on as well as I hoped I might in the Savings Bank. I don't know. It must have been a nuisance for them, me going off and coming back again, not to say that they were not absolutely fair with me. I am sure they were. I was a bit unsettled so I wrote to see if there was another chance for me to go down again. Eventually Bill Sloman sent a telegram and said there was a place at Halley Bay if I would like it, and I would need to go and do a radiosonde course at Hemsby in Norfolk. That is what eventually happened; I went there.

Track 8 [0:36:48] Chris Eldon Lee: *So although you had done two terms of being a metman, radiosondes were new to you?*

Track 8 [0:36:54] Alan Precious: Yes, radiosondes were new to me. I found that very interesting really. I met some nice people there, some of whom came down with me to Halley Bay.

Track 8 [0:37:07] Chris Eldon Lee: *This is where you have to launch balloons, is that right? I gather that was an interesting experience at Halley?*

Track 8 [0:37:13] Alan Precious: Yes. We had an enormous cylinder in a hut, which we had to fill up with a certain amount of aluminium pellets, I think they were, and something else: a mixture of something that looked like soda crystals, soda of some kind, which with water formed hydrogen and filled a balloon – filled a measured amount into a balloon. The balloon lifted up weights off the floor and then it was ready to go. We attached to it a little transmitter, a battery-filled transmitter, with a little windmill on, which signalled down to us temperatures and windspeed and so on. This was tracked by radar and we plotted the track of the balloon and its instrument on a graph, and obtained a picture of the upper air conditions.

Track 8 [0:38:38] Chris Eldon Lee: *You were following it with the theodolite, were you?*

Track 8 [0:38:40] Alan Precious: No, it was followed by radar.

Track 8 [0:38:44] Chris Eldon Lee: *Oh really? OK.*

Track 8 [0:38:36] Alan Precious: Yes there were two radar sets at Halley, ex-RAF things, and there were two radar operators who tracked it, and we metmen down below, in the met office down under the ice, followed it on a screen.

Track 8 [0:39:14] Chris Eldon Lee: *How did you launch them, then? Was that an interesting experience?*

Track 8 [0:39:19] Alan Precious: The normal way was to launch the balloon and its canister, which was on the end of a long piece of string, through a hatch in the roof. The trick was to not let the canister hit the roof as it went out, otherwise it might put it out of action. I think we always managed not to hit the roof, but in very windy weather you could not do that. We had to stand outside holding the canister and let the balloon lift up the string. But in strong winds of course the balloon went along parallel, more or less, with the ice, so we had to run at quite a speed and throw the canister into the air at the right moment so that it would not hit the ground. This was occasionally very difficult. You could not always guarantee not to “graunch” the canister, as we used to call it, and it was a sickening moment when this happened because you had to go through all the business again. I think I remember an odd day when we did this several times until the boiler thing got too hot and we could not put any more stuff in it. It was too hot; we had to wait until it cooled down. Yes, it was good fun.

Track 9 [0:41:16] Chris Eldon Lee: *Was this daily or once a week or ...?*

Track 9 [0:41:18] Alan Precious: Every day we did that, yes.

Track 9 [0:41:21] Chris Eldon Lee: *All the year round?*

Track 9 [0:41:22] Alan Precious: Yes. I am pretty certain that we never missed a day. Obviously on some days we had to do it more than once, as I have said.

Track 9 [0:41:35] Chris Eldon Lee: *Right. Halley is a bigger base than the others, and some of the Fids regard it as a Cinderella base because there is less beauty attached to being at Halley. How would you assess it?*

Track 9 [0:41:50] Alan Precious: It was certainly very different. What I missed about being at Halley was: there was no sight at all of any rock, or anything other than ice. Also, partly because of this, you could never go out without wearing goggles, sun goggles, There were good things about it, in that there were a huge number of people so that you never got tired of anyone. Also you were never thrown too closely together with anyone, whom you might not have wanted to be. But we gathered together as a base, certainly every Saturday, to watch a film. We had a number of films which we got to know off by heart, certainly some of them. I remember one of them was *Pal Joey* with Frank Sinatra and one of the scenes in this was: some showman or other was running a club and Frank Sinatra approaches him and says ‘I want a job as a singer in your club.’ And this actor (whoever he was. I am not quite sure) he said ‘Singer? I don’t have singers. I am running a girl show. Legs, and tassels.’ We used to repeat things like this to each other. [laughs]

Track 9 [0:43:53] Chris Eldon Lee: *So lines from the films entered daily conversation, did they?*

Track 9 [0:43:59] Alan Precious: Yes that is right. We also had meals together of course. We had good meals together: Midwinter dinners and so on. Very good indeed.

Track 9 [0:44:10] Chris Eldon Lee: *Socially, did the base divide up into cliques?*

Track 9 [0:44:14] Alan Precious: Not to any great extent, I don’t think, no. People’s particular jobs brought them into contact with each other, I think. For instance the ionosphericists and Stuart Marsden’s business with the aerials (the radio-astronomy) were very much together. I think also Mike Thurston’s biology and Dennis Ardu’s glaciology came together a bit, partly because of their offices being next to each other. The builders, they obviously all worked together, and knew each other, and of course we all helped them in building the new hut. No, we all got on extremely well together I think. The pups, as they came along, brought people close to each other in some ways, because they were interested in dogs and the pups, things like that.

Track 10 [0:45:43] Chris Eldon Lee: *How did you take to living underground?*

Track 10 [0:45:45] Alan Precious: Surprisingly easily, really. I was not looking forward to that – going down below – but really, when you were downstairs, you did not realise that you were underground. You had to climb up these ladders to get out and do the met obs: read the thermometers and so on. We also had to have guide ropes occasionally, from the top of the hatch towards the thermometers, and towards the balloon hut and the radar and so on. But no, I very quickly got used to living underground; it did not seem unusual at all. It was an experience in that as you went, particularly as you left the hut and you came to the foot of a ladder, and you went up a sort of snow cave appearance up to the top, until you went through the hatch. It was quite an ??? [inaudible] experience but it was good really.

Track 10 [0:46:59] Chris Eldon Lee: *There was attempts to find new routes out of Halley, wasn't there? You tried to pioneer a route which was not entirely successful? This was with David Easty.*

Track 10 [0:47:11] Alan Precious: Dave Easty and Eric Jones and John Skilling. John Skilling and I sledged together, and Dave Easty and Eric Jones were a team. We did not have entirely full teams at that time. I am not quite sure why. We had less than nine dogs each in the teams, but we followed the ice cliff down from Cape Rol (Cabo Rol), down towards where the ice edge joins the inland ice at the Dawson-Lambton Glacier. The Dawson-Lambton Ice Stream (as it is known now) forms the edge of the ice shelf where it joins the inland ice. The year before us, some manhaulers had found a route across this. It is a great chasm really. They had found a route across and got onto the inland ice. John Skilling and the rest of us found another route across, as I say, near the entrance of the glacier into the Weddell Sea. We found a route across and ran along the inland ice, ran along very well. It is in huge waves of ice and we ran along these until we came to where the previous year's party had made a crossing. We crossed there and then we continued along the limit of the ice shelf up to what was called the Gin Bottle (the McDonald Ice Rumples) and then sledged back to base. So we did a pretty big circular tour of the ice shelf.

Track 10 [0:49:25] Chris Eldon Lee: *And the function of that was to ...?*

Track 10 [0:49:28] Alan Precious: It was to see the limits of the shelf and certainly to try and find a route across. We had made earlier attempts. Denis Ardu, Colin Johnson and myself and Dave Easty again had made several exploratory journeys to the Dawson-Lambton ice chasm, to try and see a route across, but all we came to was huge cliffs and chasms – a broken jumble of ice in the bottom. So although John Skilling and I found this route across, I do not think it has ever been used again. It was in the wrong place. Colin Johnson and Dennis Ardu found a route much further north, towards the Tottan Mountains where they had visited.

Track 11 [0:50:32] Chris Eldon Lee: *Were there other notable events that year? Anything that went seriously wrong or ...?*

Track 11 [0:50:40] Alan Precious: I don't know. The aurora was very good; we had some very good sights of the aurora. Amazing really. And I and several others spent a month or so with Mike Thurston down in Penguin Bay where Mike was studying the emperor penguins. His work, I think, was following up from that done by Dr Wilson in 1914 (whenever it was) [Transcriber comment: not 1914; Wilson died with Scott and Bowers in 1912) – Andy Smith] and we occasionally had emperor penguin omelettes as a result of that.

Track 11 [0:51:28] Chris Eldon Lee: *Did any of the penguins ever appear at base? Did Mike not bring some back?*

Track 11 [0:51:35] Alan Precious: I think some occasional ones did manage to go towards the base but I sure they were lost, the ones that did. Mainly they were down in a huge rookery (as they were called), and I am sure Mike Thurston estimated how many there would have been. I cannot remember a figure but it was into thousands anyway.

Track 11 [0:52:07] Chris Eldon Lee: *But you do not remember any actually inside Halley, in the buildings?*

Track 11 [0:52:11] Alan Precious: One might have been brought in, I am not sure. I think Mike might have had one in to do an examination; yes I am sure he did.

Track 11 [0:52:30] Chris Eldon Lee: *It sounds like it was a fairly calm and collected year for you, after all the trials and troubles of ...?*

Track 11 [0:52:36] Alan Precious: It was. I would say that, yes.

Track 11 [0:52:41] Chris Eldon Lee: *Was it OK not being Base Leader?*

Track 11 [0:52:44] Alan Precious: I had not really expected to be Base Leader. I was King Fid on the way down, with Captain Hindberg on the *Kista Dan*. He used to call me Presley because he could not pronounce Precious but the Chief Steward, who saw to our meals everyday, he always used to call me 'Mizzer Preeshus'.

Track 11 [0:53:23] Chris Eldon Lee: *You must have been one of the more dog experienced men at Halley that year?*

Track 11 [0:53:31] Alan Precious: I think so. Colin Johnson obviously had done more down at 'W' and, I am not sure whether he was at Adelaide. He certainly was at 'W' with Angus Erskine, who of course was a dog man from Greenland.

Track 11 [0:53:50] Chris Eldon Lee: *But you had some Greenland dogs, didn't you?*

Track 11 [0:53:53] Alan Precious: We had some Greenland dogs as well as some Canadian, yes. Yes, I think we brought the first lot of dogs to Halley Bay. Some came directly from Greenland; some had been born in Denmark on the way down from Greenland to the Antarctic, and we also picked up a lot of ex Hope Bay dogs from Admiralty Bay. I think we took about 18 or 20 dogs down from Admiralty Bay.

Track 11 [0:54:32] Chris Eldon Lee: *So that was the first time that dogs had been kept at Halley, in '61?*

Track 11 [0:54:36] Alan Precious: Yes, I believe so. They did have one dog there, a runt, which had been picked up from somewhere, I am not quite sure from where.

Track 11 [0:54:47] Chris Eldon Lee: *As a pet?*

Track 11 [0:54:47] Alan Precious: Yes, as a pet.

Track 11 [0:54:48] Chris Eldon Lee: *How did you look after the dogs? Were they on the surface all the time?*

Track 12 [0:54:55] Alan Precious: No. Coming down was a good idea. Bringing them down on the ship was a good thing. The Fids on board, it was their first acquaintance with dogs. They got used to them: feeding them, feeding the puppies and so on. We

brought them ashore; we had them on spans, and as the winter came on and the new hut was drifting over, some tunnels were made alongside one edge of the hut. Canvas sheeting was put down first, which was quickly covered with ice, and it formed a nice ice cave with little kennels inside for them to get into. So they lived inside. This was something new to me, and I was not sure personally whether it was a good thing or not. I think now it probably was a good thing in that it kept them a bit warmer than they would have been outside, but I did feel that they were bred to live outside whatever the weather. However it does not do them any harm to be inside.

Track 12 [0:56:20] Chris Eldon Lee: *They were not down there for nine months solid though, were they?*

Track 12 [0:56:25] Alan Precious: No. They were just down for the mid-winter period and then brought out again onto the surface.

Track 12 [0:56:32] Chris Eldon Lee: *So they would be under snow for six to eight weeks or so, would they?*

Track 12 [0:56:36] Alan Precious: Oh at least that, yes.

Track 12 [0:56:39] Chris Eldon Lee: *Without coming up?*

Track 12 [0:56:41] Alan Precious: Mm. Oh they were brought out occasionally for exercise. Yes they were. Someone would bring out two dogs at a time, and take them out and round the hut a few times and then back again.

Track 12 [0:56:56] Chris Eldon Lee: *Walking the dog?*

Track 12 [0:56:57] Alan Precious: Yes indeed.

Track 12 [0:56:59] Chris Eldon Lee: *And they did not seem to mind their incarceration?*

Track 12 [0:57:03] Alan Precious: It did not seem to bother them at all, no. They still barked and still made a fuss when they got food. It was fairly messy. The blubber got around a bit down below.

Track 12 [0:57:19] Chris Eldon Lee: *So were you having to muck them out?*

Track 12 [0:57:22] Alan Precious: Not to that extent, except just taking out the odd scraps you know, the skins. They always left the skins, with a certain amount of blubber on. So you had to take that, clear that out occasionally. But mainly the blubber just sank into the ice and snow.

Track 12 [0:57:41] Chris Eldon Lee: *What about the toilet?*

Track 12 [0:57:42] Alan Precious: The dogs' toilet? Yes, well that would happen when they were outside on the walk. [laughs] Otherwise it got buried.

Track 12 [0:57:55] Chris Eldon Lee: *Right, OK. They had a bit of competition, didn't they, the dogs, because you had some Muskeg tractors at Halley that time?*

Track 12 [0:58:02] Alan Precious: Yes, we did have Muskegs ...

Track 12 [0:58:03] Chris Eldon Lee: *Were they successful?*

Track 12 [0:58:05] Alan Precious: ... which I would say were successful, yes. Very useful vehicles. Certainly they towed large loads of stores from the foot of the ice shelf up to where we were living, including all this building material. They brought all that up which was laid out in long rows for weeks on end, as it was brought into use. Yes, they were very useful for that, and of course Colin and Dennis Arduus used them both to go to the Tottans<sup>1</sup>. I travelled on them occasionally. Travelling inside the cab was very comfortable, but outside – sitting on the back – was a cold, draughty experience, and you had to be careful not to put your hand anywhere near the exhaust.

Track 12 [0:59:11] Chris Eldon Lee: *There was a Muskeg tragedy a couple of years later at Halley?*

Track 12 [0:59:18] Alan Precious: Yes one of them went through a crevasse I think, but I believe they towed it out, I am not sure. I do not know about that. [Transcriber comment: the Muskeg tractor involved in the 1965 tragedy was not recovered. An International Harvester tractor which had gone down a crevasse in 1969 (no casualties) was successfully recovered in 1972. Andy Smith]

Track 12 [0:59:30] Chris Eldon Lee: *OK. My question is really to do with whether, at that point, anybody was aware that Muskeg travel was a bit dodgy? The Muskegs went first?*

Track 12 [0:59:45] Alan Precious: I am sure they were. Whenever Colin and Dennis travelled in them, they were linked together by a steel cable, and one went ahead, certainly, so that the rear one could, at least in theory, have held the front one had it gone through a crevasse, yes.

Track 13 [1:00:11] Chris Eldon Lee: *So they always went in a pair?*

Track 13 [1:00:13] Alan Precious: Yes. Not around the base but travelling away, yes.

Track 13 [1:00:18] Chris Eldon Lee: *OK. We have got a couple of minutes left and I usually ask about scary moments. Now you have told me about one or two of yours*

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<sup>1</sup> Comment by Mike Thurston, 5 April 2021: "Colin Johnson and Dennis Arduus didn't use Muskegs on their journey to the Tottans. Certainly, a number of Muskeg trips were made on the Brunt in 1961, but none of them made the inland ice - that wasn't achieved until the establishment of the Bob-Pi crossing in 1962, I think. Two of these were depot-laying trips to support the main sledge journey with Depot B about 100 miles east of Base but still on the Shelf. Colin and Dennis left Base 20 October and reached the Tottans on 14 November. Maurice Sumner and I sledged 50 miles NE up the coast and met Colin and Dennis by arrangement early in December 1961 at what we knew then as Grants Inlet. The four of us arrived back at Base on 9 December. The 600 miles from Depot B to the Tottans and back to base is, I believe, the longest unsupported sledge journey in the FIDS/BAS annals. The details herein are confirmed by the Johnson/Arduus sledge report, a copy of which I hold."

*already, but it may be that you have discussed these as well, but apparently at Admiralty Bay you were walking across an icy slope and you lost it. Is that right?*

Track 13 [1:00:34] Alan Precious: Yes. Between the base and Plaza Point there was: not a steep ice slope but a fairly gentle gradient, and I had walked across it several times easily enough. But on this particular day the ice had become glazed and I did not have the best of boots on. I got about halfway across and realised that I was slipping. I could no longer get a grip on the ice and I started sliding down towards Plaza Point. Eventually I was on my behind and sliding down with no means of stopping, and coming towards spiky bits of rock. I thought ‘Well if I hit that with my behind, it is going to do me some damage.’ So just as I got towards it I forced myself up onto my feet and was glissading down on my feet. As I got to the rocks I had to start, take up my speed running over these jagged bits of rocks, which I managed to do, and eventually managed to slow down and walk. But that was certainly a stupid, silly moment I would not have liked to have had again.

Track 13 [1:02:08] Alan Precious: My third moment, again was a bit silly. A huge iceberg came into Admiralty Bay, and leading from it there was a long spur under the water, rising up to a little ice island. I was with Adrian Wensley-Walker in the boat and I thought it would be a good photograph if I went onto the ice island and Wensley sailed in front of the big berg with his boat and I got a photograph of him. So we put that into action. I got out onto the bit of ice with my camera, and Wensley went off and motored slowly along in front of the iceberg. I put the camera to my eye to take a photograph and found there was no film in it, or the film had been finished. Also the little island I was in was bobbing up and down like nobody’s business, and I was in danger of being flung off into the sea. So I shouted ‘Come back Wensley.’ And I got into the boat again.

Track 13 [1:03:37] Chris Eldon Lee: *Moments like that, did you ever have a cold sweat later.*

Track 13 [1:03:41] Alan Precious: I don’t know about a cold sweat. Certainly I felt ‘Well that was a stupid thing to do. Don’t do it again.’

Track 13 [1:03:50] Chris Eldon Lee: *The story of FIDS is littered with moments like that.*

Track 13 [1:03:55] Alan Precious: Mm. I mean previously and often I had been across much steeper ice slopes with a pair of crampons on, no problem at all. So I should have had crampons with me and put them on.

Track 13 [1:04:11] Chris Eldon Lee: *Yes, it does strike me sometimes that it miraculous that not more Fids met a sticky end.*

Track 13 [1:04:15] Alan Precious: Yes, indeed. Yes.

Track 13 [1:04:16] Chris Eldon Lee: *Well I am glad you didn’t.*

Track 13 [1:04:18] Alan Precious: So am I, yes.

Track 13 [1:04:21] Chris Eldon Lee: *Alan, thank you very much.*

Track 13 [1:04:22] Alan Precious: Thank you.

Track 13 [1:04:24] ENDS

Snippets:

- Eating dog liver. Track 1 [0:00:14]
- Becoming Base Leader at Admiralty Bay. Track 3 [0:11:24]
- Two boating incidents. Track 6 [0:29:08]
- Filling and launching met balloons at Halley Bay. Track 8 [0:37:07]
- On living underground. Track 10 [0:45:43]
- Pioneering a new route across the Hinge Zone. Track 10 [0:46:59]
- The dog tunnel. Track 12 [0:54:55]
- A narrow escape from injury. Track 13 [1:00:34]