

This is Alan Wright, recorded at the Marguerite Bay reunion at Bowness on Windermere recorded on the 30th of October 2010 by Chris Eldon Lee. Alan Wright.

Alan Wright. Alan Frederick Wright. Date of birth 12th August 1934. Place of birth, the house I'm living in now, Birmingham.

CEL. Whereabouts in Birmingham?

AFW. Quinton.

CEL. So now you're seventy

AFW. Six.

CEL. Seventy six.

AFW. Yes, Last August.

CEL. So, you were wintering in Adelaide Island in 1961 and 1962.

AFW. Correct.

CEL. And it says here you were a surveyor.

AFW. Yes. I wasn't to start with.

CEL. You weren't a surveyor before you went.

AFW. No. In fact I didn't know anything about FIDS before I went. Most people who are at University with Geography, they know about it. I didn't because I was in mechanical engineering.

CEL. So what happened. How did you get to hear about it.

AFW. I have always been fascinated by Scott. And in the Scouts I was in the Scott patrol. The seniors. And I read a lot of the books as well. Apsley Cherry Garrard – The worst Journey in the World – and that inspired me quite a bit. And I decided..... I was working on jet engines, rocket motors – research – experimental.

CEL. Is this with Armstrong Siddeley?

AFW. Yes. In Coventry. And I decided it was fascinating work but if I had this hankering to go to the Antarctic I had better to do something about it rather than wish I had done something about it.

CEL. And that hankering came from reading about Scott as a younger man.

AFW. No.... er.... Oh,... as I was a younger man. Yes, yes. That's correct. And I always enjoyed the snow – just a general fascination with it. And so I thought – I had better do something about it and I hadn't a clue what to do about it but I guessed they must advertise and I guessed maybe they advertised in the Times. And so, the next morning I started buying The Times – that was a Thursday. Second day, that was the Friday, there was the advert. It was incredible.

CEL. For what though.

AFW. They were looking for a GA – a General Assistant. So I applied – um – I was so stunned to see the advert I hesitated for a week. “I thought am I going to do this?”. And I said “Yes”, applied they wrote back saying “sorry, the position has been filled already – but apply next year if you are interested”. – but the next year in fact – well that winter I decided I had better find out if I really do like skiing and that so I went up to Scotland – in those days there were no ski lifts – you had to walk up which was great because if you were tired you didn’t walk up again so you never skied if you were tired. And they wrote to me – BAS – or FIDS as it was then – wrote to me and asked if I would like to be considered as a meteorologist. Well, I’d always enjoyed met work so I said yes, went for the interview and they said, we’ll let you know – then they sent me a telegram – would I like to be considered as a surveyor. So that was even better for me because a surveyor was on a mobile network whereas a Met man was on a fixed base. So I said yes and I went for the interview – it went great until six questions came and each question I had to say “No, I don’t know about spherical trig, I haven’t done any of this, no, no, no”.

CEL. So, they were interviewing you for a job about which you knew very little.

AFW. Correct. Before I went to the interview a friend of mine who I went to school with was on the civil engineering staff at Birmingham University so I contacted him and he showed me what a theodolite was – I thought I ought to know what this was before I went – and he showed me what a level was – showed me a few things.

CEL. So, you did some homework.

AFW. Yes. Oh yes.

CEL. But not enough by the sound of things.

AFW. No, not enough, not on the mathematical side – so these six questions – I’m thinking “oh, oh”. So they said – “will you wait outside and there was a very elderly – that’s me now, 76, saying elderly - and elderly, bent backed civil servant and he said “how did you get on?” and I said, “Oh, not very well”. And he said “did they ask you to wait?” I said “Yes” – he said “you’re all right”. And sure enough, they called me back in and they said “now, you know you’ve got the job as Meteorologist” – I said “No”. “Oh, didn’t we tell you?” And they said, “well, no problem, it’s your choice”. We’d like to offer you the job as surveyor but if you’d prefer the job as Meteorologist no problem, we don’t mind”. So I opted for Surveyor.

CEL. Because you’d be able to do some sledging work.

AFW. Yes – much more interesting.

CEL. Who were “they” – who was on the other side of the table?

AFW. They... now I think it was.....it may have been Bill Sloman and also I think the director of the Directorate of Overseas Surveys was there – Wiggins I think that was at the time – um – so I think they asked me to leave and Bill Sloman probably decided whether I was the right character and the DOS person probably decided whether they could hammer the maths into me.

CEL. Did you get the sense that you were being sussed out psychologically for this?

AFW. I didn't, but I think they certainly were and I think they did a very good job. Basically, most of the Fids – you didn't get many problems and on our base there were 6 of us and we had zero problems. So, I, I, I'm sure they did.

CEL. So you know, because they'd asked you questions you couldn't answer, you knew what you didn't know.

AFW. Yes.

CEL. So, did you have to try and find out about that – about that before you went.

AFW. I didn't have to try and find out about it – they said, “don't worry, we can train you” – they trained us.

CEL. They sent you away did they?

AFW. Sent away – no they sent – yes and no – away from home but we went to the Directorate of Overseas Surveys which was at Tolworth – South of London – and once there we also went to Imperial College for a week – Sunningdale – on a field course to learn how to observe astro work to the stars and the sun and the moon and at DOS there was a chap called Norman Leppard and he put us through a training course – there were 3 of us, Tony Edwards who went to Hope Bay, Bob Metcalfe who went to Stonington and myself to Adelaide. We didn't know where we were going until the end and Norman sussed out which base he thought each of us would fit into. And again, I think he was very good – he sussed us – and the brilliant thing about Adelaide that first year – they got 6 of us – they got 2 Alans, 2 Gordons and 2 Franks.

CEL. So you were training. How did you take to surveying work? It was new to you wasn't it.

AFW. It was lovely. No, yes, it was the right element for me, it really was. The engineering.... I enjoyed it because it was leading edge technology and we had.... we went up in aircraft flight testing the engines and we went in the test cells testing the engines so it was really enjoyable and I had reached a position where I was in charge of defect investigation on a particular engine. But.... It was variety but I wanted to get out and...

CEL. You wanted adventure.

AFW. Yes.

CEL. You're perhaps not the right person to ask – but why didn't they simply employ a surveyor rather than convert an engineer into one?

AFW. I don't know. I really don't know. Um. Possibly having interviewed me as a Meteorologist they probably -.... When I applied as a general assistant they probably looked at my CV and decided – well, I'd got a bit of background that might enable me to be trained as that. And then maybe when they suddenly wanted a surveyor Um.... I... I don't really know.

CEL. Did you get the sense that there wasn't much competition – that there weren't hundreds of people knocking on the door wanting jobs.

AFW. Yes.

CEL. It was a...

AFW. I didn't form any idea whether there were a lot or not a lot – so when I said yes it was probably a wrong answer. I didn't form any impression about it. I was glad I'd found out where they were and had the interview not really thinking – oh, I'm going to get this. Hoping I would but not really having strong feelings either way.

CEL. So you did your training then departure time came round.

AFW. Yes, and during the training always the surveyors had a trip up to the geology department in Birmingham – which was great for me because I lived in Birmingham. And we met Ray Adie who was the professor there and during this time he was always very friendly to surveyors. A lot of the geologists I believe didn't get on too well with him at times because he was very demanding – but the surveyors he was very friendly with and when he found I lived in Birmingham he asked if I knew when I was going down – which I did – it was November 1st or something like that – on the *Biscoe* – and he said 'oh well, I'll take you down'. And he arranged for his lab assistant to call at my house the day before to pick up my luggage and to call at my house on the morning to take me on the back of his motor bike to Ray Adie's house and I went down in the car with Ray Adie – that was a lovely welcome really.

CEL. What kind of sailor were you?

AFW. Not very good – I always remember – we sailed about 6 o'clock I think – I said it was November 1st – I don't know if it was

CEL. It was around then.

AFW. Yes it was – we sailed down the Solent

CEL. On which boat.

AFW. The *John Biscoe* and quite nice, nice and sheltered. And then they called us to dinner – we were all in the mess room and of course we hadn't met everybody before so there were a lot of strangers – we were strangers to each other and slowly one became aware that there were fewer people in the mess – because by this time was moving a bit and then you realised why – and so very courteously you said 'excuse me please' and then you got up gently then you sprinted like mad for the toilets. And then from then on every day I was sick. In those days we had to holystone the decks as well – because they were wooden decking and so you had these balls of lime on the end of poles and scrubbed them and I'd be doing that then suddenly I'd be sick. And then by the time we got to Monte – we spent about 4 days there then another few days down to Hope Bay and by the time I got off the ship I was eating well on base but a week after landing. Neil Orr, the doctor, he weighed us all and I was a stone and a quarter light still – I was down to about eight and a quarter stone – after eating for a week.

CEL. Did you have any doubts about what you were doing if you were so poorly on the way down?

AFW. No, no.

CEL. It didn't throw you at all.

AFW. No, because I knew the Antarctic wasn't moving like the ship.

CEL. You actually went to Hope Bay first of all because ..

AFW. Yes, because the couldn't The boat was due to go to Rothera – where Rothera is now –

CEL. To establish Rothera.

AFW. To establish it, yes. But the ice was still not broken up and so for the first month – or six weeks maybe – I was at Hope Bay. And that was good because Hope Bay was the leading sledging base and, during the summer anyway most of the surveyors go up there to use the ships and the helicopters from the navy ships to do a summer survey of the islands. And that's what was going on then. So I was at Hope Bay but for my first ever field trip I went with Dick Harbour and Mike Smith across to Mount Bransfield which was a key station in this network. And that was very good actually because we went across the bay, rather than sledging all the way round by Mount Taylor and Flora – we went across the bay – took the dogs up the ice bank and then sledged to Mount Bransfield. And then we camped there – we had about two weeks there – we were there for..... we were there for New Years Day – that's right – so it probably was November the 1st by the time we got down there – say a month down there – yes – say November the 1st to sail. And, notorious for bad weather up there so it was a very good introduction because I was with 2 people who had already spent a year with the dogs, a surveyor, wonderful introduction.

CEL. How did you take to the dogs? Had you.... Did you Were you a doggy man anyway?

AFW. No. No.

CEL. So that was another new skill to acquire.

AFW. Yes. I er, but they're lovely really – they're soft - and I didn't have to drive the dogs at that time – that came later at Adelaide – but I was quite happy with them. But I had one experience on Mount Bransfield where I did stop and think 'why am I doing this – am I doing it right or not?' But it worked out well.

CEL. Tell me more about the experience, Alan.

AFW. I lost the tent.

CEL. You lost the tent?

AFW. Yes, I er, it is bad weather up there, you're in the cloud often and in the cloud you can't see any detail.

CEL. Oh, you didn't lose it in a storm?

AFW. Yeh.

CEL. Oh, you did, right.

AFW. Yes. I was on outside man and so I was – I went outside to feed the dogs and having fed them I then went to the toilet – and I'd lost the tent! Completely! Luckily I knew by then how you could make the dogs howl so I worked my way upwind and howled – which I

hoped would set the dogs off - like owwwww – and off they go – and then I went downwind and I picked up the sound of the dogs. So I could go back upwind to the dogs and then I found the tent.

CEL. Right, so it hadn't blown away.

AFW. Oh no, I hadn't – I had lost myself..

CEL. Right

AFW. In. After feeding the dogs ...

CEL. The tent had lost you in fact.

AFW. Yes, that's right, yes.

CEL. That was a bit of a lesson in fact.

AFW. It was sobering. But I obviously didn't tell anyone about this. But in the book "Of Dogs and Men" Kevin Walton asked us to write little bits if we'd got and I wrote about that and when Mike Smith learnt that – because I met him just after that had come out – I met him, he came to one of the Hope Bay reunions and he said 'I never knew that'.

CEL. So that was quite a clever tactic of yours and you'd picked it up quite quickly because you hadn't been there very long.

AFW. (chuckling) It was survival I think.

CEL. So you did about a month at Hope Bay

AFW. Yes, I think it was probably 5 or 6 weeks.

CEL. And then you eventually got to Adelaide.

AFW. Yes, then we at the end of that session they decided we could move down so the ship went down via Lockroy and the other bases Argentine Islands. On the way down passing through the Argentine Islands it picked up the dogs and four other people who had failed to get into Rothera the year before. So there's Frank Preston, Gordon McCallum – Frank was the surveyor, Gordon was the dog man, Alan Crouch, general assistant and Frank Fitton, Radio op. So they came on from Wordie with the dogs. So we went down and no that's Frank, I met Frank up at Hope Bay because he'd gone up for the survey – it was the first time I had met him and off we went down and eventually – we spent a day trying to break the ice into Laubeuf fjord but unsuccessful and they'd already got this back up plan of putting the hut on the Southern end of Adelaide.

CEL. That's quite an experienced team wasn't it – considering you were a new boy.

AFW. Yes, but that's the normal procedure, they try and swap half the men each year and yes, I suppose instead of 3 and 3 we were 4 and 2. But it was very good cos they were all good people, well knitted together and Graham and I fitted in OK. So that was good.

CEL. I presume you had to start building these huts did you?

AFW. Yes,

CEL. From Scratch?

AFW. Yes.

CEL. From the prefabricated bits.

AFW. Yes, very simple and straightforward and they'd got Jim Shirtcliffe who was a carpenter come odd job man and John Cunningham who was a carpenter shipbuilder, Howard Chapman, Surveyor, Frank Preston – so they'd got all the skills they wanted and they built 9 blocks of concrete – or 12 blocks of concrete - cement fondu so they could use seawater – then they built the floor – then someone had the brilliant idea that instead of building and putting the stove in – it was one of these AGA cookers – we put the AGA on the floor before we put the walls up. Much easier. Then we built the walls, put the roof on and as soon as the roof was on the ship went and that left the 6 of us to finish the hut and establish ourselves. So we did.

CEL. What was it like? The hut. Basic?

AFW. Oh very basic. The floor was about a threequarter inch wood one sheet of roofing felt and threequarter inch of wood. So in the winter when it got cold, you spilt water on the floor it froze. And we used to sit on the backs of the chairs and have our feet here because it was cold on the floor. But in the top bunks you didn't need blankets. It was hot. But it was very good we had one main.....

CEL. But did anyone ever make any attempt to remedy that problem because every Fid I talk to it's the same old story, your feet were freezing and your head was hot. Did nobody ever think of trying a way of inverting that – by using a fan or something?

AFW. No. No you just

CEL. You just lived with it. Sorry, I interrupted you.

AFW. No, it's a good question actually. No, out of each 12 months we only spent less than six months in that base hut. So we were out sledging for six months so it was luxury when we came back to it after living in a tent.

CEL. You had your own little space I presume – your own bunk.

AFW. Yes we had – the layout in the hut was an entrance hall and at the end of that the design was a toilet. But we changed that – we used that area as a darkroom – photographic – and we had a little part of the entrance hall curtained off for a toilet. And then the main room was – was with the stove and a table and six bunks around it and a window in the wall. So it was basic but adequate.

CEL. Okay.

AFW. And the loft we used as a food store, a sledge workshop and at the end of that we made a survey office as well.

CEL. Well did you get stuck into surveying quite quickly, once the hut was up? Were you off and away?

AFW. Well, I was very lucky there because Frank Preston had tried to get into Rothera Point the year before and failed but he'd had the whole year at Wordie part – during that year he'd managed to work up the survey plan for our combined period. And the main plan was to link the survey that had already been done at Stonington and at Horseshoe and to the North of Adelaide and we'd got to link this up. And so he'd got the photographs, got some maps and he'd planned a triangulation scheme and trilateration to do that. So our main job, once the ship left – our main job was to finish the hut and to start laying bases so we could do the reconnaissance in the spring.

CEL. And you had two teams doing that – is that right? Two dog teams.

AFW. No we had four dog teams. Each of the four – Alan, Gordon, Frank and Frank. Frank Fitton, Alan Crouch, Gordon McCallum and Frank Preston – yes, that's right – all four had a team. But we worked in two groups of three. The main reason being that in unknown country, if there's three of you it's easier to pull the third one out of a crevasse once he'd dropped in it.

CEL. So you were leaving nobody behind at base.

AFW. No.

CEL. The base was empty when you were in the field.

AFW. Yes. Because all the dogs were with us anyway. We had about 6sixty dogs – so -

CEL. So the hut will be locked up for six months.

AFW. No – at intervals.

CEL. You'd come back and unintelligible ..

AFW. Yes, I think my longest sledging trip was about 3 months. So you'd go out and come back and.... Graham..... it tended to be Graham Dewar the geologist, with Frank Fitton, who went with him – Alan Crouch. They went as one team – that was the geology team. And the other was Frank Gordon and myself I'm getting mixed up on this. Actually.

CEL. So one team was doing Geology and one team was doing Surveying.

AFW. Yes, that's right Purely for our reconnaissance work. Once we'd reconnoitred everywhere and we knew where we could go safely, instead of going in two teams of three we went in three teams of two. So I went with Gordon McCallum, Frank Fitton went with Graham Dewar and Alan Crouch and Frank Preston went – which then meant we could get a lot more done.

CEL. A couple of questions then from that one. If there was nobody back at base, with whom were you in radio communication? We used 68 sets, we'd each got a 68 set and we'd communicate – sometimes we could communicate with each other other times Tony Quinn who was at Stonington acted as our ...

CEL. Radio control.

AFW. Radio Point. Yes.

CEL. And I think you had some fairly new kit for doing the surveying work.

AFW. Yes, Tellurometers, it was the first year for those. We'd had a day – no a week – with Tellurometer in London learning how to use them and that was quite good training because they would remove a valve and put in a dud valve and we'd – they didn't tell us they'd done that – and we had to find out what was wrong with it....

CEL. Yeh.

AFW. And correct it. So it was a very good course. And it made – it transformed surveying. Up to those days, surveying was carried out the same way as the Egyptians carried it out when they built the pyramids. It got a bit more sophisticated – measurement of angles – but it was still basically the same. With the advent of the Tellurometer you could transform your way of handling things – instead of triangulation you could use trilateration. And the very first Tellurometer job was done in Kenya and they completed a two and a half year project in twenty eight days. So...

CEL. So people like Frank Preston were aware of the great advances that had been made - more than you because you hadn't done it before.

AFW. Yes, yes.

CEL. And was he impressed?

AFW. Yes. They had their difficult sides as well.

CEL. What was the problem?

AFW. Batteries.... You had to always carry two batteries. Directorate of Overseas Surveys, DOS, required that each line that you measured with a tellurometer had to be measured in both directions. A to B and B to A. Which was fine but the first Tellurometers were only one function – they were either Master or Remote. So this meant that to each survey point you had to take two Tellurometers. And you had to take two batches of batteries. And the other thing with them was the power control unit – and very often it was a vibrator – and sometimes it wouldn't work so you had to kick it – the instruction was 'if it doesn't work, kick the power supply unit' and it started vibrating.

CEL. Why was it vibrating?

AFW. It was part of the electronic technique of producing the required signals – I can't give more details than that.

CEL. So it was sending a signal to the other meter.

AFW. Oh yes, what was the other thing. The other thing was it was very good also because it had a voice communication link so with theodolites all you've got is – sometimes you've got a light at one end and the theodolite at the other and you could devise some signalling with the lamps. With the Tellurometer you had a telephone at each end you could actually speak to each other – so it had some very useful functions. But in the MRA1 you took this phone out of a little compartment – but you could never get it back in again. And you had to get it in before you could pack it. It was so frustrating. But it..... that's....

CEL. It does sound remarkably high tech for 1961 doesn't it.

AFW. Oh yes, it was..... you're aware of GPS.

CEL. Well, I know about it yes.

AFW. Right, well.

CEL. It was the first step was it.

AFW. Tellurometer was the first revolution in land surveying - the second was GPS.

CEL. That was forty years later.

AFW. Yes. Yes.

CEL. OK.

AFW. And both were good for me and eventually I ended up working for Tellurometer and eventually I ended up having my own survey company working with GPS.

CEL. So you got quite a lot done in the remains of that summer, did you?

AFW. Yes, and the following year, the following season, we completed the complete survey. So that was wonderful for me. Poor old Frank had done the reconnaissance and had to go before we'd done very much – the following year Dave Nash came in as the other surveyor and he and I finished off the scheme which meant I had eighteen months of writing up at home so poor old Dave when he came home he not got any of the project to write up. So I was very very fortunate.

CEL. You were surveying around Rothera again.

AFW. Yes.

CEL. Was that because they were planning to build a hut there?

AFW. No no, that was our link with the surveying area. We..... because the ship couldn't get in we had to build a base at the Southern end but we had no sea-ice link round Adelaide so we had to go up the piedmont, down a place called Shambles Col, into a place that was then called Square Peninsula and then we could reconnoitre that but we still couldn't get on the sea ice. When we could get on the sea ice we could complete all the reconnaissance and start the observations.

CEL. And were you tying this in at all to any aerial survey?

AFW. Yes, we were using aerial photography and in fact some of the photographs were flown while we were there. Using the Otters. So we actually had to fly some of the photography and in fact it was very good – all our points we had to photo identify on these photographs so that back at DOS they could set out the whole scheme.

CEL. You managed to get yourself down to Fossil Bluff at one point didn't you?

AFW. Yes, purely as co-pilots. That was great because Fossil Bluff was being built so all the equipment was offloaded at Adelaide and the aircraft flew down later in the summer and we – the pilot had to have somebody to travel with him. And so we all took it in turns to go with..... it was Bob Bond aaargh – the name's gone of the co-pilot. So that, that was good. And also, the following year the planes got down before the ships did and so when the ship was getting close we went out with the plane to greet the ship. Which was good.

CEL. And you were building some more huts at Adelaide – you were developing the base a bit more.

AFW. Yes, it became a building site almost. The first year we had this one hut – Stephenson hut – Stephenson House - and the second year they built a muskeg garage, a diesel shed and another base hut. So the base hut..... they increased the number of people on base from 6 to 11 so they had a static base and a field base and instead of a diesel shed made out of packing cases on our shed we had a proper diesel engine. When we just had our shed – hut – you'd got to have the power running so the radio would work but the generator interrupted with the radio signal.

CEL. It interfered with it.

AFW. Yes. So eventually you had to have a foot generator – switch the power off – have a foot generator –

CEL. You're cycling with your feet now Alan.

AFW. I was on base once and I had to cycle and key – and as soon as you're transmitting the resistance built up on the cycle. So its quite interesting.

CEL. You were able to pedal and operate the... the...

AFW. The Morse key.

CEL. At the same time?

AFW. Yes, yes.

CEL. Not many people managed to do that.

AFW. Its like rubbing your head and your stomach

CEL. Patting your stomach.

AFW. Yes, yes.

CEL. So, did you have some escapades in the fields? In the field when you were doing your survey work? Apart from losing your tent – or not finding it rather. (some other words indecipherable with Alan talking too)

AFW. Yes, not finding the tent. Yes, there were three that I can recall. One of them should have been scary but wasn't. But the other two – the one I've already mentioned about losing the tent – I say losing the tent but you're quite right, we didn't lose the tent – the tent lost me. I lost myself. But it sounds much better saying 'I lost the tent' than 'I lost myself'. So that was the one. The..... the scariest I suppose was when we were going up Mount Ditte – this will have been the first year – there was Gordon McCallum leading, myself carrying the survey kit and Alan Crouch at the end - we went up, we did the observations and we were coming down – and Alan went through a crevasse. And it was on a steep slope. I can still – I can still see in my mind – I've still got the image of Alan probing and disappearing. And we all came off and we were all sliding.

CEL. Towards the crevasse.

AFW. Towards the crevasse. And fortunately - fortunately Alan came to a bridge in the crevasse – a snow bridge. So we stopped – I was – so I was then able to get my ice axe in because I hadn't been able to get it in. Gordon came down and established voice contact – established that Alan was completely sure that he could untie – and then Gordon and I went down and we crossed the crevasse in a different spot – came up from below and got Alan up that way.

CEL. That's clever plan isn't it.

AFW. Yes, but I'd taken my – it was so hot I'd taken my gloves off so I lost all the skin on my knuckles. But that was – it's funny, things go through your mind as you're sliding down and you realise that you've done everything you can but you're still sliding. So, that was one.

CEL. Did it shake you up at all?

AFW. No.

CEL. Did you adjust your practice in light of the near miss?

AFW. No, because we'd done everything we could do.

CEL. And you were roped together?

AFW. Yes, everything was in order - and we were lucky there was a snow bridge.

CEL. Okay.

AFW. The other one. This was on the summer survey the following year and HMS Protector comes down and the helicopters lift us on to different islands. And I was being landed on to Guebriant Island and they were winching me down on to the top. And then the helicopter lost its lift. Next thing I knew I was lying on my back, on the top and the helicopter was... here. On my chest. And then it shot up, got its lift and I was thinking 'shall I unhook' and luckily I didn't because it was (???) out and if I had unhooked I'd have had a quick descent to the base. It's about 400feet I think. And then he landed us . But when the helicopter got back to the Protector there's a rating runs in each side with chocks – to chock the wheels – and he ran in then he ran straight out again because the undercarriage had been smashed on the rock. So, I was very lucky. And.... That should have been scary but it wasn't.

CEL. And that was simply because – for some reason...

AFW. Well, because of the shape of the island – its quite a severe drop on one side – he was hovering over this and obviously a gust of wind had come – and stopped. And... he just.....

CEL. The air pressure had gone.

AFW. Yes.

CEL. And you didn't lie awake after that, sweating and....

AFW. No, Not at all.

CEL. Now, young Fids seem to have a sense of immortality it seems to me. Is that right.

AFW. Either that or we don't have any imagination (laughter). Because when we went down – I mentioned Shambles Glacier – down there they did lose people one year. And the –

sometimes – you could see – you’d be on the crevasse and the whole dog team and sledge were on the crevasse. But we – we were lucky – so you have a - I think you just don’t think too deeply about it.

CEL. Did you have any other unusual moments?

AFW. I think moments of humour more than anything else. There are a couple I can think of. One was my first curry. With a base of six....

CEL. Your first curry?

AFW. Yes.

CEL. Do I want to hear this?

AFW. Well – it shows the expertise I developed in my cooking skills.

CEL. Had you any previous cooking skills before you went?

AFW. Only camping. And that sort of thing. But I’d never – my first curry was eaten on base – it was the first time I’d ever had a curry – and I was by this time – twenty six I suppose. But on our base – there were six of use – so we had a twelve day rota. Two days on one job, two days on another – and so on. Two days on cook – and I was on cook and I thought ‘I’ll do a curry’. And everyone was ready and waiting – and the rice was taking a long time to cook – I hadn’t realised that you had to boil the rice before you fry it. (laughter) So I had a quick learning curve then. So that was one. Another one was at Deception. I think this was on my way out. No, more likely it was on the way down. We were loading kit on to the launch to take them back to the ship. From base. And I’m – I was standing on the edge – and you swing, swing back, swing and loose it.... And I’m just getting to this position and they said ‘no, no we can’t take that’. And stupidly I held on to it. So I learnt about moment um then.

CEL. Laurel and Hardy

AFW. Yes, yes – I went in the sea. (laughter). So. But what else? No, that’s probably all – we had a – we welded together, the six of us, very well. We had a good base. In fact, 5 of us we’re still in touch. The sixth one we’ve lost. But when I go back – I’m staying up tomorrow but when I go back I’m calling in at Skelmersdale Town Hall and try and locate this Alan Crouch who has disappeared – he used to work for Skelmersdale City Council. So I’ll try and see.....

CEL. Well, good luck in Skelmersdale.

AFW. Why?

CEL. Don’t leave your car unattended.

AFW. Really?

CEL. Well, it’s probably improved now but when I was working in Liverpool in the early 80’s it was somewhere you didn’t go in the dark.

AFW/ Really? OK.

CEL. The Fuchs ice piedmont was something you were concerned about wasn't it. I think you were..... weren't the trying to find a way of landing aeroplanes there? Have I got that right?

AFW. That's where they did land the aircraft. In fact..... Bob Bond.... And Abe Lincoln was the other one – Bob Bond was a fantastic pilot – because, flying the stuff to The Bluff, he's take as much as he could on the aircraft and when it was a strong wind he'd almost do a vertical take off. He'd rev up and off you'd go. It was interesting when you'd – coming back – sledging, though because it was convex – so you couldn't see the edge – you couldn't see base – there was no island off base so you just had to have your direction right and if you didn't you ran into crevasses. And then you'd got a 100ft cliff. In fact, once, one of the teams – a dog got off and he went over the cliff. But amazingly he walked back along the ice. That's the only thing I can think on the piedmont.

CEL. Again, in "Ice and Men" it suggests that actually, when you doing a basic survey work you worked on the East coast, linking up to Horseshoe Island and Frank Preston worked North. Is that right?

AFW. Yes, that's correct, yes. Yes, when we split into our two teams, I'd forgotten that to be honest. Yes, Gordon and I worked on Laubeuf Fjord so we worked on Webb Island, Wyatt Island, Day Island – visited all these – went up to The Gullet – and in fact, when we were going to observe the Tellurometer links on that from HMS Protector, they tried to land two of us, Dave Handel and myself, on Day Island, but they couldn't so Captain Graham at the time – he actually brought HMS Protector right up to The Gullet and a couple of seamen came with us and we chipped a platform on Day Island so we could pitch the tent. And then, off it went and left us there. So that's

CEL. Door to door service.

AFW. It was lovely working in that area. Piniero Island as well. The very first time we went down to Rothera Point by sledge – this was in the summer – the first year that we were there – before there was no sea ice and in fact it was deathly quiet and you could hear the whales blowing and you could see the whales. Absolutely wonderful. And another time I was on an island in the summer survey – very small island – off Cape Alexander- no, off Alexandra point – and two whales passed us – and the island was only as big as your room here – and we were looking down on the whales. So that was very good. Yes, so Gordon and I covered that area – Piniero Island – I think we had the best – and Frank did the Northern end – Mount Vallein.

CEL. When you came to go Alan, what were your feelings?

AFW. Sad, sad. If anything had happened and the ship hadn't come in and I'd had to stay I would have been quite happy. And then, I left the ship in Montevideo – with John Killingbeck – and we spent 3 months travelling through South America. So that was another adventure as well. That was...

CEL. You wound up in Northern Chile – in the copper mine area.

AFW. Yes, we – when we went – we crossed – we went from Montevideo down to Bahia Blanca – then we crossed Argentina and we went to the Lake District – the Chilean Lake District – and then we travelled up Chile. And we stopped at Santiago and we stayed with the

Chilean base leader that was based in deception when Joh was base leader on the British base.

CEL. John Killingbeck.

AFW. John Killingbeck, yes. So we stayed with him - he was in the air force and he arranged for us to have a military flight up to Antofogusta (as pronounced – should be Antofogasta) and then John and I went to the Copper Mine office and asked if there was any chance of visiting Chuki Comato copper mine. And they said yes – so we got there. Wonderful.

CEL. Did you. Did you watch the rescue of the Chilean miners the other week on Television?

AFW. I haven't got television, so I didn't.

CEL. You heard about it.

AFW. I heard about it. I was following it closely on the radio. Wonderful achievement that.

CEL. Did you ever try to go back again?

AFW. Yes and no. I had the opportunity and in hindsight I should have taken it. Bill Sloman asked me if I'd go as the British advisor..... no, observer On an Argentinean base. And I was just finishing my 18month writing up at DOS and I'd got in my mind I ought to try and continue my engineering side of things and so I opted – no. I don't know.... If I had said yes I don't know what would have happened – I may have stayed all my time working with FIDS. As it was, I joined a company that built masts – television masts and things and eventually I ended up working for Tellurometer. I wouldn't have missed that for anything. So there's pluses and minuses.

CEL. Have you been back in more recent years?

AFW. I went back 2005 on the trip that Neil Marsden organised – Marguerite Bay 2005 – and that was tremendous – but the only base we couldn't land at was base "T", where – there was much less ice around and there was a very heavy swell so we couldn't land. And that was sad because I would have loved to go back to those huts. Everywhere else we went – it was amazing at Rothera where – in the winter we had our base photograph taken there - six of us with our two tents – and now there's – the ship, the Polar Star – berthed alongside and they laid on a buffet for 120 visitors – it was incredible – and aircraft hangar for 3 or 4 aircraft – the equipment store that looked like a Lillywhites sport equipment shop in London – It was a wonderful experience. So yes, I have been back.

CEL. Its been lovely. Thank you Alan for sharing....

AFW. Is that enough? To give you information?

CEL. If there's more you want to say.

AFW. No, I think we've covered everything. It was a wonderful period in my life – and I don't think that I changed during that. But it gave me tremendous experience which has always been something to look back to.

CEL. What from your Antarctic years do you think you have employed in your life since?

AFW. Probably everything. Getting on with people because you.... One was aware that you did have to make some allowances at times. You could become critical of the way the other guys spread the butter on the biscuits. After you've been with someone for three months – its careful – but you have to be careful but you realise that and we all seemed to get on OK.

CEL. So your tolerance levels were improved were they?

AFW. I don't know that they were improved. But certainly its an experience that carried through to later life. And the other – the other thing – one of the main things is.... There are two attitudes in life. When there's a problem, there's a group of people who say "oh dear, what are we going to do now?" And there's a group of people who say "Ah, how are we going to get round this?" And the latter is always the course you have to take. I think that's one of the best things. Because as soon as the ship's gone you're on your own. You've got to do everything. And we were lucky – we had a good job to do.

CEL. That's marvellous, thank you Alan.

AFW. Right.

END.

50m 58s.

Transcribed by Jonathan Walton, November 2014.