

JOHN SWEENY

Edited transcript of a recording of John Sweeny interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee near Bangor, North Wales on 6th February 2011. BAS Archives reference AD6/24/1/109. Transcribed by Dawn Sutcliffe on 22nd February 2016

[Part 1 0:00:00] Lee: This is John Sweeny recorded by Chris Eldon Lee on 6th February 2011. John Sweeny part one.

Sweeny: My name is John Sweeny. I was born in Limerick in the Republic of Ireland in 26th June 1963.

[Part 1 0:00:19] Lee: So now you are?

Sweeny: I'm 47

[Part 1 0:00:22] Lee: What are you doing these days?

Sweeny: I'm a forestry contractor or arboriculture contractor, basically tree care, forestry work and firewood contractor. Keep physically busy in the outdoors which is the sort of work that I've always wanted to do.

[Part 1 0:00:44] Lee: So you've always been an outdoors boy?

Sweeny: Yes. I did spend a couple of years working in a factory after my time with BAS and it certainly reaffirmed that outdoor work was where I was happiest.

[Part 1 0:01:04] Lee: What sort of background did you have? Where did you go to school?

Sweeny: I was brought up in the west of Ireland but mostly in urban areas. Most of my schooling was in the city of Limerick but I used to spend all my summers in West Cork on my grandparents farm. I was quite keen when I was growing up to be a farmer but it's the land question. When I left school I started at University, I did a year at University in Dublin and then I left University and joined the RAF. I spent 7 years in the RAF and in my last year in the RAF, I had actually read about the Antarctic surveys. I'd read a book by Wally Herbert and that sort of set a seed in my mind and when I was leaving the RAF in 1990 a friend pointed out an advertisement in I think Climber magazine for field assistants. I read the advert and I'd read something about the Antarctic so I investigated it. At that stage I had been involved with the Mountain Rescue teams in the RAF and I'd done quite a lot of climbing. I'd done

a couple of expeditions to Greenland so I felt I was reasonably competent technically but there was one aspect of the requirements in the advertisement that was it asked for people who were familiar with small engines and basic mechanics. So I felt that was probably a weak spot. So I enrolled in an agricultural college in Aberdeen for a year but in the meantime I applied to BAS for a job. I spoke to I think it was Mrs Ruddock? Does that name ring a bell, no?

[Part 1 0:03:44] Lee: It doesn't matter

Sweeny: Anyway she wrote back to say 'Yes, we'll put your application on record, and apply next year again once you've done this course and we'd be very keen to hear from you'.

[Part 1 0:03:54] Lee: Had you done any flying with the RAF?

Sweeny: No I was in a ground trade.

[Part 1 0:03:59] Lee: Mechanic?

Sweeny: No I was a gunner. A regiment gunner

[Part 1 0:04:04] Lee: OK. No direct application to the Antarctic then?

Sweeny: No not really no, although the outdoor pursuits, opportunities in the RAF were quite good and certainly in Scotland in my last posting at Lossiemouth we could join the Mountain Rescue team at Kinloss and that got us out every weekend, winter and summer. So I did have an interest and obviously I'd been on a couple of trips to Greenland as well with schools expeditions so it was an area that I was interested in and getting some experience in as well.

[Part 1 0:04:49] Lee: So would you say you built up a desire to experience that kind of environment or was it just here was an unusual opportunity; I'll just have a go for it and see what happens?

Sweeny: I think for quite a few years I'd been interested in the Antarctic and Arctic. For instance whilst I was in the services I'd applied for one of the joint service Arctic expeditions to Ellesmere Island. Now although it was only a summer expedition it was still a taste of the Arctic, and at that time the services had completed a number of very interesting Arctic expeditions like Elephant Island and Brabant Island, these are in the Antarctic. Joint service expeditions spent upward of a year living in tents in the Antarctic so I was quite aware of these trips. In fact I'd had

friends who'd been on them. That aspect of expedition interested me rather than climbing high mountains. I guess I'd been inclined to go in the direction of the Arctic or Antarctic rather than say for instance the Himalayas.

[Part 1 0:06:19] Lee: So you did your year at Aberdeen and got your extra qualification?

Sweeny: Yes, in fact the college were able to offer myself and another mature student a sandwich course so we spent an extra two months in the college over the summer period and they basically covered the syllabus of the first year of a tractor mechanics course in the two months, and then we joined in with the second year and completed what would have been a two year course. The logical progression would have been that we would have gone on to work in a dealership for a year and then I would have got my tractor mechanic certificate. As it was I went down to Cambridge and had an interview with BAS and I was offered a place more or less as I finished college in Aberdeen.

[Part 1 0:07:18] Lee: Do you remember who was behind the table for the interview?

Sweeny: Yea, Richard Hanson, Pete Marquise and I think John Hall was there as well. Subsequently I got to know all three of them and all three of them are very approachable, nice people to work for. So I don't think it was the high powered interview that one might have expected. I do remember being asked to, for instance, plot a compass course, and orientate a map and things like that which I can't remember if I did right or wrong! Of course if they gave you an Antarctic map it doesn't work the same as a northern hemisphere map. The interview I think went reasonably well and there was a medical afterwards and then off we went.

[Part 1 0:08:25] Lee: So the interview was a breeze? Did you come away thinking it was a forgone conclusion?

Sweeny: No I certainly didn't approach it like it was a forgone conclusion. I guess I was reasonably confident in that I'd felt that my expeditioning skills were reasonably up to the mark, and that having gone to college and spent a year trying to get these mechanical skills sorted that I was reasonably confident that I was well equipped for the job, but I certainly didn't take it for granted that (...)

[Part 1 0:09:10] Lee: Do you remember or looking back now if I mention this, do you feel as though you were being psyched out at the interview? They were assessing you as a human being, mentally so that your stamina, your

ability to muck in and get on with other people? Psychological profiling they call it these days, they didn't in those days.

Sweeny: I don't remember very unusual questions but bear in mind I'd come from 7 years in the services, most of that time working on tours. I'd spent a year in the Falklands, I'd spent 6 months in Belize, I'd spent time working in small groups in isolated places anyway. Whether I felt confident about talking about that sort of experience or not, or whether they felt 'he's obviously done it and he knows what he's talking about' I don't know. I don't remember the interview being particularly (...)

[Part 1 0:10:18] Lee: Incisive in that way?

Sweeny: It certainly didn't intimidate me in that way anyway.

[Part 1 0:10:25] Lee: There's a long history of ex-service men joining BAS.

Sweeny: There's always been a peppering of service people there

[Part 1 0:10:34] Lee: If there was a psychological weakness it tends to get exposed in the services doesn't it?

Sweeny: Exactly yea. I think you would have an idea of where you were going, although the reality of going to the Antarctic was completely different to anything else I'd experienced. But all the same if you felt you weren't going to be happy in that sort of a situation I think you wouldn't have gone to work for BAS.

[Part 1 0:11:00] Lee: Where did they send you and how long did you have before you had to go?

Sweeny: I can't remember the exact chronological order but I remember when I finished college in Aberdeen which would have been towards the end of June, within a week or two, I was offered a post with BAS and it was for two and a half years and it was based at Rothera, and that was everything I wanted. In the year or two before I went to BAS, I did particularly search out ex-Fids to find out where I should go and where the real experience would be and I had a friend called Roger O'Donovan who had been a field GA down at Fossil Bluff in 1970's. I had a good feeling then where the real experience would be. Because obviously at that stage in the early 90's there was field assistants being deployed to South Georgia, Halley, I think Faraday as well and Signy in the South Shetland Islands, so there was 5 bases that I could have gone to and there was one I wanted to go to and that was Rothera. I

think I must have known about the dogs at that stage as well and I knew they were at Rothera.

[Part 1 0:12:45] Lee: Had you already had an affinity with animals, with dogs?

Sweeny: I remember being interested in it and I remember reading Wally Herbert's book and being quite inspired by travel with the huskies. Although I didn't have any experience of huskies before I went down to Rothera.

[Part 1 0:13:07] Lee: What was your domestic set up like at that point? Were there people you had break the news to that you were going to disappear for two and a half years?

Sweeny: Only family and friends, I wasn't in a relationship or anything like that. I was quite used to (...)

[Part 1 0:13:26] Lee: Being away

Sweeny: Being away and at that stage if you remember the services had gone through (...) I was quite lucky while I was in the services that they'd gone through a period of really quite rapid increase in size and deployments right through the 1980's up until the early 90's and the late 80's when the Berlin wall collapsed, the cold war ended and basically the services took a real nose dive after that. While I was in, every year there was more and more units being deployed and more and more deployments available so I never seemed to spend more than 6 or 9 months in any one place before there was a tour, and off you went for 4 months here and came back and you were there for 6 or 9 months and then you were off someplace else.

[Part 1 0:14:27] Lee: Did you draw upon that when you got there? We're leap frogging slightly now but when you found yourself in Rothera for two and a half years did you draw upon the things you'd learnt about coping with a situation like this in the forces?

Sweeny: I remember on the trip down, which was quite a formulative experience in itself

[Part 1 0:14:50] Lee: I'll ask you about that next, but go on!

Sweeny: Arriving, it was a very interesting experience. I remember the day we were to dock in Rothera, because we travelled all the way by ship, the cloud was down to about 2 or 300 feet above sea level and it was 8

oktas¹ of cloud, a complete sheet of cloud. There was some dark sea visible between the patches of sea ice and the stone and snow filled gulley's coming down the side of the island. That's all you could see and I do remember thinking to myself 'oh my god, what have I let myself in for, two and a half years of this!' [laughs] Probably the very next day the cloud disappeared and the sun came out and there was a 3000 foot ice fall; 5km outside the kitchen window a 9000 foot peak there and a ski-way behind. It took about 24 to 48 hours to realise what a fantastic place you were in but the first impression coming in, I'll never forget that, is 'oh my god, two and a half years!' [laughs]

[Part 1 0:16:20] Lee: Of mank

Sweeny: Of mank and sea with bits of ice floating in it. But of course the reality was very different once the cloud lifted.

[Part 1 0:16:33] Lee: So tell me about the trip south then. What was so memorable about that?

Sweeny: We sailed on the maiden voyage of the *James Clark Ross*. Historically a fantastic experience, one of the last ships built in the Swan Hunter yards at the time.

[Part 1 0:16:50] Lee: The last!

Sweeny: The last ship. Probably the only ship ever commissioned especially for BAS. We were on the maiden voyage all the way from the UK down to Rothera. I'll have to mention the fellow Fids aboard the ship, in particular Ben Hodges. Ben was an inspiration and of course Ben was down sledging with dogs the year I was born [laughs]. There he was in 1991, 28 years later just inspiring us young Fids as to what we were letting ourselves into and the experiences that we were in for.

[Part 1 0:17:47] Lee: Can you elaborate on that? Can you remember what sort of things he was telling you about?

Sweeny: Have you spoken to Ben?

[Part 1 0:17:51] Lee: I have but I would like to hear your views as well.

Sweeny: It takes a while to get to know Ben and draw out the stories. He doesn't spin these amazing yarns but he responds very well to being asked

¹ an okta is a unit of measurement used to describe the amount of cloud cover at any given location.

relevant questions. Particularly he is always keen to impart technical information and of course if you start talking about his dogs, well [laughs] you never hear the end of Dot and the rest of them. There was plenty of opportunities on the way down to talk to Ben and Ben's an inspiration anyway. At that stage he was really keen on his fitness, and keen to recapture something, I guess, of his youth really. But equally keen to try and induct a future generation of Fids and in particular field assistants, because that had been his particular thing. That was the highlight of his early Antarctic experience, was working as a field assistant at Stonington. So it was, not a window on the past, a door on the past that you could sit for hours with Ben and get all the stories and the techniques and the (...) it was fantastic! I don't know if BAS had managed that, if they'd said 'right let's put a few old Fids on this ship going down with these young ones just for them to learn the ropes in a nice casual way'. But it certainly worked, and it was a fantastic experience.

[Part 1 0:19:58] Lee: How was the ship?

Sweeny: The ship was lovely, fantastic, I'm hooked on cruising now! The ship was very comfortable. We were treated slightly different to the *Bransfield* in that the officers and Fids mingled on the *James Clark Ross*, whereas on the *Bransfield* the officers kept to themselves, the Fids kept to themselves and the crew kept to themselves. So I felt on the *James Clark Ross* that it was a much more open structure, and we sat down every evening with the officers for an evening meal. But equally we could go down and sit in the crew mess and most of us actually worked for part of the passage somewhere on deck trying to help the crew with their various tasks. The boat was very comfortable, the food was good, the company was good and we drank a lot of port [laughs].

[Part 1 0:21:10] Lee: Were you obliged to do your shift on the boat or was that just something you Fids chose to do?

Sweeny: There was a little bit of both really but I think most people felt keen to get stuck in. Most of the Fids going down were actually first time or probably novices and keen to make a good impression and get stuck in and help.

[Part 1 0:21:45] Lee: Were you made aware it was a ships maiden voyage?

Sweeney: Oh yea

[Part 1 0:21:51] Lee: In what way? Because things started to go wrong a bit didn't they as well? Were you aware of that?

Sweeny: Do you mean the raucousness amongst the passengers?

[Part 1 0:22:05] Lee: No I meant with the ship

Sweeny: With the ship, yes that's right, yea

[Part 1 0:22:09] Lee: Teething troubles

Sweeny: There was yes.

[Part 1 0:22:11] Lee: What do you recall of that?

Sweeny: The main one was getting stuck in the ice for a week [laughs]. Chris Elliott, the captain on the maiden voyage, has this really wonderful manner; imperturbable, relaxed, he was quite a revelation as a, essentially, a commanding officer compared to my experiences in the services. He made a big impression on me, and the way that the BAS cruise were actually run; it wasn't the rigid hierarchical structures that you would have in the military or in a naval ship. It was much more relaxed and the man held his position due to his experience and knowledge and respect. So that was very interesting for me. There was a lot of comparisons between the way BAS operated and the way the military operated. In fact in nearly all aspects the way BAS operated was far superior and I think the military could have learnt a lot from the way BAS operated.

[Part 1 0:23:47] Lee: Again can you elaborate on that. Why did you feel it was superior? What was it about it that made you feel that way?

Sweeny: Of course its smaller so it was a lot more personal, for instance on the next of kin aspects, the personnel department made contact with your family before you went down, and appointed a member of the staff at Cambridge to be a conduit or point of contact for any messages to and fro. The next of kin really felt that was a very nice touch. From me coming from 7 years in the forces where nobody had ever spoken to my parents or said 'your sons off for 4 months down to the Falklands, if you want to send anything here's the address or send it to me and I'll send it on. If you need to get in touch urgently blahdy blah' whereas straight away once we signed up with BAS there was that contact so to speak

[Part 1 0:24:57] Lee: Does the word caring come in here?

Sweeny: Yea caring. I spoke about the discipline and the management of the crew on the ship and that really struck me as being very different.

[Part 1 0:25:11] Lee: Was Nick Beer on the ship? Remember him? He was the commissioning captain of the *James Clark Ross*. He would be slightly older than you but not much.

Sweeny: No I don't remember Nick. But he was on the maiden voyage?

[Part 1 0:25:27] Lee: I got the impression when I interviewed him that he was certainly there for the launch. And he was the captain who was negotiating with Swan Hunter about the final details of the design as it went along.

Sweeny: Right ok. I'm sure he must have been on part of the voyage but Chris Elliott was the (...)

[Part 1 0:25:43] Lee: He was the man you had contact with?

Sweeny: Well he was the commanding officer of the *James Clark Ross* for that particular voyage

[Part 1 0:25:50] Lee: So how was Rothera when you got there? Was it all you'd hoped?

Sweeny: I'd been to the conference at Girton. Do they still have it at Girton?

[Part 1 0:26:09] Lee: They do

Sweeny: So I'd been briefed quite thoroughly about the equipment we were using, the techniques that we used for travelling, the stores and backup that were available, the layout of the base to some degree, but I don't think you really have that much of an idea about the actual layout and size and scale of the place until you land there. I remember my first impressions of coming into the quay at Rothera being a little bit intimidated by it, but that was just the low cloud, the greyness and all the rest of it. But the base, it seemed as far as I can remember, well organised. We were lucky to have somebody like Ben with us who knew the lay of the land and got us all sorted and settled in pretty quickly, and obviously there was the wintering crew that met us and showed us around. That was quite an experience as well because although the air unit had arrived a month or two previously, there's always a strange attitude when the main body of summer staff and

replacements arrive into this little world of 17 or 18 people who've been together for a year or two. At that stage we'd bonded as a group on the ship, we were on the ship for 3 or 4 weeks so we were quite a tight group when we got to Rothera and we did feel this 'them and us' attitude.

[Part 1 0:28:30] Lee: Was it an overt feeling or just something bubbling under the surface a little bit? I ask that because 12 months later you were on the other foot weren't you? You were seeing the newcomers come in.

Sweeny: There were overt tensions and it hadn't been an altogether happy winter.

[Part 1 0:28:58] Lee: Your first winter?

Sweeny: No that was the winter we came down during the summer. So we were arriving for our first summer so the winter that had just ended had been I think a little bit unhappy.

[Part 1 0:29:10] Lee: How do you mean? What do you know of it?

Sweeny: I don't know an awful lot but I know that the wintering staff were not happy at all [REDACTED] [laughs] So we won't name any names here! [REDACTED] and I remember in the bar in the evenings there wasn't a great deal of camaraderie and banter. It was definitely a clique of winterers versus all the new arrivals.

[Part 1 0:30:01] Lee: We're talking about your arrival in December 1991?

Sweeny: That's right yea.

[Part 1 0:30:07] Lee: That was such a strong feeling it was fairly obvious to the newly arrived Fids?

Sweeny: Yea, it was obvious that things hadn't (...) There was definitely difficulties between the winterers and the summer staff, [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. The field assistants weren't too worried because we were gearing up for our first summer in the field

[Part 1 0:30:40] Lee: I'll come to that in just a moment. Let me just leap forward to the next winter when you were bunkering down for that winter, was there anything from what you experienced when you arrived which you

could actually apply to yourselves so that that situation didn't arise again? [REDACTED].

Sweeny:

[REDACTED]. So a base commander was appointed from amongst the wintering staff. Now who was the base commander the year I went down? I can't remember. The problem was between the wintering staff including the base commander I think, and the base manager who was a summer appointment who during the winter actually did all the logistics for the base back in Cambridge. So he was a permanent employee based in Cambridge but spent the summer in the Antarctic

[Part 1 0:31:42] Lee: So the difficulties arose when he arrived in the Antarctic?

Sweeny: Yea, and I think he came down with the air unit although we definitely had met him before; we had met him at the conference

[Part 1 0:31:58] Lee: Did that scenario repeat itself 12 months later when you were a winterer and the new base manager arrived? Having been aware of the previous winters

Sweeny: It's quite interesting because in my first winter I came down, there was going to be 5 wintering field assistants. Two field assistants carried over from the previous winter and then there was three new field assistants. I remember one of these field assistants, 2 carried over from the previous winter, one of them was the doggy man for the new year, for my first year he was the doggy man based on his experience the previous year, and so I got on straight away with him. Almost from day one I got on very well with Asti. But the other GA wasn't particularly interested in the dogs and had a different demeanour and outlook. I remember through the winter thinking 'this guy hates me for some reason' [laughs]. I felt very odd about it and there were a few other events that happened over the winter and I obviously thought it was just me and I had upset people and all the rest of it. But I remember talking to an old GA who'd spent 3 or 4 seasons and a couple of winters down there and I was working with him in my second summer season. We were working away in the sledge store preparing our kit to go out for the coming summer season and he made sure there was nobody else in the sledge store and he said 'so how did it go this winter?' I knew I could talk to him because he'd spent a couple of winters down and he'd been a winter commander. So I said 'do you know I can't make out why I've upset this guy but I really have'. I said all these things and I felt there was this real tension. He said 'oh I

wouldn't worry about that, in our winter I was nearly killed by a mob!
[laughs] Then I realised immediately after that first winter that these tensions that go on within the group are quite normal, and there was various tensions over the winter. It really came to the surface at the beginning of our second winter because a large proportion of us were actually carrying on for two winters. At the beginning of the second winter we were read the riot act (...)

[Part 1 0:35:36] Lee: By?

Sweeny: By Paul Rose who was the field operations manager. I think that was his term. The gist of it was that there was a group on base who were almost too keen on getting out and about and doing things; skiing and climbing and travelling with the dogs and all the rest of it, and there was another group that didn't particularly want to do those sorts of things, that wanted to stay in the bar of an evening and wanted to stay in bed at the weekends. This active group were putting too much pressure on this sedentary group and it wasn't on. That was the gist of what we felt this briefing was. And I remember being very upset about that as were the other GA's because obviously as field assistants we were outdoorsy types, we were climbing types and we felt that this was a fantastic opportunity and experience to be in the Antarctic and it wasn't one to be wasted looking into the bottom of a beer glass. We worked very hard to get people out and we took people out for weekends, and in that environment down there you get this cabin fever thing where you're working with the same people week in, week out for months and months on end and sometimes you just need to go 100 yards outside the base and sit in a tent for a night or two just to get away from it all. We felt that we'd done our best to offer that to people and we never forced anybody to leave base if they didn't want to. We felt that obviously we were possibly putting pressure on these people and making them feel uncomfortable.

[Part 1 0:37:52] Lee: Was it a case of just being a bit too enthusiastic for them?

Sweeny: Possibly yea, yea

[Part 1 0:37:57] Lee: Did you spend a couple of nights in solitary confinement just to ease the pressure at all?

Sweeny: Sorry no we never actually go on your own, but you take an individual so for instance the field assistants; the routine down there was that the field assistants had a job of preparing all the field equipment, so the sledges, the tents the cooking boxes, the climbing equipment: Preparing

all that for the coming season. But their other job was to try and get people on base out of base for a week for instance before mid-winter and another week after mid-winter. So it gave the plumber and the carpenter and the mechanics and the electrician and the cook a chance to get away from their routine for a little break. Obviously the field assistants were really keen on this and really enjoyed it. We were very fortunate in our first winter that we had good sea ice conditions and we could actually travel over to Horseshoe and down as far as San Martine which was the Argentine base. We could actually take people on really interesting little trips and actually go and visit other people which was quite unusual.

[Part 1 0:39:24] Lee: Let's get you out of Rothera for a bit and look at some of the field trips you did. The first one that I'm aware of was when you flew down to Fossil Bluff and onto the Ronne Ice Shelf and you were drilling.

Sweeny: Yea

[Part 1 0:39:38] Lee: Hot water drilling project. I've not talked to anybody who's done this before so what exactly were you up to?

Sweeny: So the idea was that an oceanography project wanted to ascertain what the flow rates were and temperatures were below the Ronne Ice Shelf. So the idea was to use hot water to melt a hole all the way through the ice shelf and then to deploy a series of instruments in the sea underneath the ice shelf to pick up the currents and temperatures and salinity and all the rest of it.

[Part 1 0:40:23] Lee: So you were drilling right through the ice shelf to the sea below?

Sweeny: Yea, yea

[Part 1 0:40:26] Lee: Where do you find large quantities of hot water in the Antarctic?

Sweeny: Yea, well there you go. We ended up flying in; it must have been maybe about 4 or 5000 litres of kerosene which was fed into a large domestic hot water boiler. So we had a large inflatable water tank, but I can't remember how it actually started. But it must have started by somehow heating a small amount of water, and then circulating that through a hot water boiler back into the tank, and then shovelling loads of snow into the tank to build up this reservoir of water. Then once that tank was full of warm water, the water was directed through a lance over a tripod and lowered on a big long hose down through the ice shelf. There was a special nozzle on the end of this lance that melted

this hole as it went down. I guess because of my mechanical skills and also because it was my first year I was sent down to the Ronne Ice Shelf. These sort of sedentary projects on the Ronne were never regarded as particularly attractive [laughs] propositions to the field assistants. But there you go; it's your first job.

[Part 1 0:42:13] Lee: Was it taking a day to get through the ice or hours? To drill through the ice?

Sweeny: Oh no, I should think it took about a week or more. There was various technical glitches

[Part 1 0:42:30] Lee: Such as?

Sweeny: Like the boilers breaking down, the lance getting stuck or the hoses getting stuck in the hole. It was quite tricky; it was a lot of pressure on the engineer in charge, a guy called Keith Mackieson who devised this system and he was under a huge amount of pressure to make this work.

[Part 1 0:43:01] Lee: The moment you stopped doing it of course everything froze up I guess?

Sweeny: Exactly yea. It was quite stressful for him in particular although he took the pressure very well. It was basically his baby and I can't remember if there was two GA's, I think there was only one field assistant, so I was the only field assistant there on that particular project.

[Part 1 0:43:30] Lee: So those were some of your first nights under canvas on the Antarctic?

Sweeny: No, my first night under canvas in the Antarctic would have been with a field assistant called John Ball. John was on the *James Clark Ross* on the way down. He was another field assistant who'd done previous tours. He'd been appointed the chief Fid for the voyage.

[Part 1 0:44:06] Lee: King Fid?

Sweeny: King Fid that's it. John took me under his wing as well and when we got to Rothera he really showed me the ropes; how to load up the unit on the Nansen sledge, how to sort out your skidoo with all your various ropes and safety lines. Where to stow this and where to stow that and he took me out then for a night up on the ski way and we pitched tent. He showed me how the whole unit worked and the layout inside the tent, where to stow stuff and how to arrange (...) I was fantastically lucky to have that 1-1 tuition beforehand with an experienced GA. I

can't remember if everyone was teamed up with an old GA in that respect but certainly I did and it was really fantastically beneficial

[Part 1 0:45:09] Lee: How did you take to the field work and particularly how did you take to camping?

Sweeny: It was duck to water really. I had spent quite a bit of time camping

[Part 1 0:45:21] Lee: Perhaps not on ice shelves though

Sweeny: Not on ice shelves no. I thought the tents were fantastic, I remember that.

[Part 1 0:45:27] Lee: These were pyramid tents were they?

Sweeny: That's right yea. The whole unit was built for comfort.

[Part 1 0:45:33] Lee: [Laughs] You're the first Fid to say that!

Sweeny: Yea really, gosh. I think anybody who'd spent time sleeping on carry mats and thermarests² would have regarded the BAS set up as the last word in comfort, which I think it was. There was a li-low and then a carry mat and then a sheepskin and then this fantastic down bag with an outer liner. In your tent you had the two beds side by side with the boxes down the middle and you had your radio at the back here so you could listen to the world service, take you to your evening scheds. You had your primus here so you could cook a brew. You had your food box there. Everything you needed was in the tent. So that was a novelty for starters. You had your Tilley³ up there hanging from the apex. I remember being very impressed with the whole camping situation. It wasn't light weight, but you didn't want for anything. Technically you could spend weeks in one of those tents.

[Part 1 0:46:51] Lee: A lot of people did

Sweeny: Yea, absolutely. It wasn't uncomfortable; if you had a good supply of books, and there was never any shortage of food or fuel. A statement used by one of the pilots I remember on one of those dingle days, clear blue skies and visibility of 50 or 60 miles and you're flying down to Fossil Bluff before lunch to drop off some drums. He says 'it almost makes you feel guilty about taking the money' [laughs]

² Sleeping mat used when camping

³ Tilley lamp

[Part 1 0:47:28] Lee: Almost but not quite?

Sweeny: I certainly would have done it for no pay.

[Part 1 0:47:34] Lee: Let's talk about the next trip. You did a geology trip to the transitions zone between Graham Land and Palmer Land. I gather you decided not to use regulation BAS clothing for this trip? Remember this?

Sweeny: I can't remember when I first came across these Buffalo type garments. I think it must have been when I was in the RAF and on the mountain rescue teams they were very popular. It was a clothing system designed by a chap called Hamish Hamilton based in Sheffield, and basically it was a single item of clothing designed to be worn in all conditions. They're still available I think, Buffalo, and it basically consists of a fibre pile wicking layer and then on the outside a windproof layer. Now the BAS gear is very good but it's a compromise and BAS never moves particularly quickly in changing. I suppose that's one of the things when you come from a different background where you've got used to a particular type of equipment. Equally you don't like to change and equally the system can be slow to react. Anyway that particular project was a real proper GA type trip. It was two geologists working in two teams, fantastically rugged picturesque territory on the peninsula, far enough down so that we were getting some good weather and good travel opportunities. A really enjoyable season and I remember, obviously we depoted our equipment before the (...) I knew I was going to be on this particular project and I knew who was working with me. Mike Dinn was the other GA.

[Part 1 0:50:00] Lee: Mike?

Sweeny: Mike Dinn, D-I-N-N. Mike had been down and worked previously and wintered and all the rest of it so I knew we were going to get on well. We were working together but not in each other's pockets. We just met up every now and again and it was all very nice. A geologising project is really the pinnacle of a GA's (...)

[Part 1 0:50:33] Lee: Did you learn anything about geology whilst you were doing this?

Sweeny: Yes I did, yea. The scientist I was working with was very quiet and reserved

[Part 1 0:50:50] Lee: Can you recall his name?

Sweeny: Yea it was Phil Leat. I'm sure he's completely fixated with what he does but he doesn't communicate that excitement. Basically we were looking for these intrusive magma dykes⁴. So quite easy to spot and usually reasonably easy to get to even with just skidoos. So I worked the whole season with Phil there and there was another scientist Mike was working with, and she was a new recruit on the scientific side. We met up and compared notes every now and again and had a few nights together and then off we went again.

[Part 1 0:51:56] Lee: You were experimenting with a new type of skidoo the Alpine Mark 2. Do you remember that? How do they cope with the workload you were putting them through?

Sweeny: The Alpine 2 seemed to be a much bulkier skidoo but it had a far superior suspension and seating position; generally much, much more comfortable machine to drive. There had been a discussion earlier on, the machines had come down, two of them had been brought down to Rothera, modified to go in to the Twin Otters. There was some reluctance on the part of either the air crew or the field assistants to use them, to transport them and use them, because it involved an element of disassembly and assembly in the field.

[Part 1 0:53:04] Lee: To get them into the plane do you mean?

Sweeny: Yea. They didn't quite fit, because they were that much bulkier than the Alpine 1 skidoo, they needed a corner of the back frame removing, the whole engine cowling and windscreen had to come out and the handle bars had to be dropped. It was nothing very technical, 15 minutes to half an hour with a spanner and it was ready to go again, but they were a far more comfortable machine to drive especially if you were a tall person. The Alpine 1 was hideously uncomfortable if you were a tall driver. The only way you could sit on them was side saddle basically, whereas the Alpine 2 was like a Harley Davidson, a very big comfortable deck and a good seating position and really good steering as well. I'd done a deal with one of the pilots; there was general reluctance among the air crew, I felt, to use these machines because of this faffing about getting them in and out of the planes. I did a deal with Andy Allsock and the deal was I took Andy up to visit these whales that were breaching through a hole in the sea ice about 25 or 30 kilometres north of Rothera on the sea ice, and he guaranteed to get my Alpine 2's into our field season. I remember doing that deal and Andy was as good as his word and in fact he reminded me; last summer we

⁴ An igneous rock body where its thickness is usually much smaller than the other two dimensions

were up in Orkney where he lives and he said ‘I go and give these shows around the islands here and I tell them that these are all my own photographs except the number of pictures of me with these whales which you took when we drove up on the sea ice to see these whales breaching through the cracks’.

[Part 1 0:55:40] Lee: So did you join the whale patters club?

Sweeny: Yes

[Part 1 0:55:44] Lee: Tell us about that. What sort of species of whale were they?

Sweeny: Southern Bottlenose whales. I didn’t realise this until I think this year that Dick Hobson, the doctor in our winter there, had actually systematically pictured every whale that breached through these holes and developed the pictures, and was able to recognise them and was then able to time the actual dives and wrote a paper which was published in one of his scientific journals about the Southern Bottlenose whale which was a very unknown species amongst the whale; but Dick spent a lot of time up there. So what happened was myself and Asty Taylor and Brian Hall were going on a winter trip; three of the field assistants had decided that they were going to go on a winter trip using dog sleds. Usually these winter trips went out by skidoo because you only had a week and within a week if you were to spend any time lying up potentially you wouldn’t get very far with the dogs. With the skidoo you could effectively travel a week’s journey in one good day with the skidoo. We decided we were going to go with the dogs and we went up through the channel between Rothera and the mainland. Let me just check what the name of the fjord was. We travelled up through the Laubeuf Fjord and we wanted to find another route up on to Adelaide Island. Rothera is on the east side of Adelaide Island, we travelled up the east side of Adelaide Island across onto the west side, down the west side and back over to Rothera. That was the idea and as we travelled up this Laubeuf Fjord we found this open water and we noticed these whales breaching in this hole.

[Part 1 0:58:38] Lee: Had you heard about this previously?

Sweeny: No, no. Nobody had seen that before as far as I know. The interesting thing with BAS had been that whereas if you were interested in a particular area or glacier or item of research, you could look in the base reports and find out exactly who had been there and what the conditions were like. But there wasn’t that much overall guidance on what you might see in these general areas. There was an annual base

reports that we used to look through. The winterers used to always do a little thing at the end of the winter saying what they'd done and who'd done this and who'd been where etc. I don't think any of us were aware that we might come across a patch of open water up in that particular area with whales breaching in it.

[Part 1 0:59:49] Lee: So tell me about patting a whale then. How do you actually go about it?

Sweeny: These whales were coming up and basically breaching, taking a few breaths and then diving again. The pool of open water was quite small.

[Part 1 1:00:09] Lee: Cricket field size?

Sweeny: Oh less than that, a lot less than that.

[Part 1 1:00:14] Lee: Duck pond?

Sweeny: Yea, couple of duck ponds yea, and of course as the winter went on it shrunk. These whales would come up and breach and maybe take 2 or 3 breaths and then down again, and they'd be away for a couple of minutes and they'd be back up. You just stood on the edge of the ice flow on the edge of this open water and just waited for them to surface. Hopefully the man was poised with the camera [laughs], the whale obliged and there you go.

[Part 1 1:00:54] Lee: Was the whale complicit in all this or did they not realise what they were doing?

Sweeny: They didn't realise what was going on. I do remember sometimes them sticking their heads out, because obviously to see their beaks they had to have their complete head out so they were probably curious to know what these creatures were on the sea ice. As far as I know they weren't coming up to (...)

[Part 1 1:01:20] Lee: Be patted

Sweeny: To peep at us

[Part 1 1:01:23] Lee: Did they seem to mind?

Sweeny: No I don't think so, no

[Part 1 1:01:26] Lee: So they were aware of your presence?

Sweeny: I'm sure they were yes. But what they made of us I don't know. There isn't any natural land based predator is there in the Antarctic? During the summer you'd have minke whales in there as well. If they came alongside a boat while you were there you could possibly just about reach over and pat one. But this is quite different in the winter when they are coming up though the sea ice

[Part 1 1:02:02] Lee: How did it feel?

Sweeny: As the whole experience really, one of privilege. I think that is the overriding impression and emotion you feel after spending any length of time in the Antarctic. It's just how lucky you are to be there, how privileged, how few people have had that experience. It always used to strike me in the Antarctic that there was no sign of man, of man's influence or of man's interference with nature. From looking around you there was no sign of any roads, any towns, any street lights. Looking in the sky above there was no contrails, there was no jets flying overhead, there was no noise. You almost had to go to the Antarctic to appreciate how much we are actually living in the age of man, the age of man's influence. In comparison for instance we skied across Greenland in about 1994 and every day we'd have streams of jets overhead, you could see them. Quite remarkable that there we were in the middle of an ice cap and we could look up and see these (...)

[Part 1 1:03:52] Lee: What you did have in the Antarctic was dogs and I'll talk to you about that after we've had a short break.

Sweeny: Right, sure.

[Part 2 0:00:00] Lee: This is John Sweeny recorded by Chris Eldon Lee on 6th February 2011. John Sweeny Part 2

[Part 2 0:00:10] Lee: Let's talk about dogs if we may John. How did you meet your first husky?

Sweeny: The dogs were spanned in two teams on a big long line with the teams spread out at the back of the base at Rothera. So I imagine, I can't remember exactly, but I imagine that Ben must have taken us there pretty soon after we landed and were let loose on base.

[Part 2 0:00:46] Lee: Ben Hodges?

Sweeny: Ben Hodges yea. Now the doctor who was leaving the year that I arrived Jim, Northern Irish guy, Jim I can't remember what his second name was. He'd actually been running the team that I was to take over. So I remember within a day or two getting on with Jim and getting to know this team that obviously was going to be looking for a driver in the coming winter.

[Part 2 0:01:30] Lee: And the team was called?

Sweeny: The Admirals. At that stage the more established team were the Huns and that team was being run by the continuing field assistant Asty Taylor and he was going to be the doggy man for the coming winter. You've heard the term doggy man have you? He was the field assistant with the main responsibility

[Part 2 0:02:02] Lee: Just give me his name again?

Sweeny: Alistair Taylor

[Part 2 0:02:04] Lee: Alistair Taylor?

Sweeny: Yea. So Alistair was running the Huns which meant that the Admirals were looking for a driver for the coming winter and although the team wasn't really functioning very well, it consisted of a group of older dogs and a group of very young dogs which hadn't really melded that well but I could see that was where my opportunity lay with this team. Although initially it meant taking over a ragbag collection, it did mean that I wouldn't be stepping on somebody else's toes. Certainly Alistair was looking after the Huns and they were going to be his team for the coming winter. First few experiences running with the dogs were disappointing I suppose, to say the least. The team didn't work well together and the chap who was running them didn't seem to me and didn't actually have either the time or the inclination to form this team and to form a dog team. To form an efficient dog team and driver you have to dominate the team. You are the king, you are the chief. It's not a committee [laughs] it's not a bus you can just jump on and turn the key and off you go. You are the boss, you're the main man and everyone respects you and does what you say. Their individual feuds and rivalries are subsumed while you're there because you establish a chain of command and everybody obeys that and they get on with it. Now they might not be particularly happy with it but as long as you're there, they know that they work and they don't fight and everybody's happy.

[Part 2 0:04:32] Lee: That's the theory is it?

Sweeny: It's almost the reality yea. You can't just walk into a team of dogs and say 'I'm the boss', I'm bigger, I'm stronger, I've got a big stick; [laughs] the dogs learn by experience. The experience of getting to know the team can be very difficult can be brutal and quite shocking at times.

[Part 2 0:05:01] Lee: How do you mean?

Sweeny: There's always these inter rivalries between the different dogs in the team so to establish the pecking order, and particularly in a team where you've got an older bunch of dogs and newer younger stronger dogs coming up, basically who's going to be the king, the leader of the pack. They settle these sort of issues with fights. There's nothing like seeing eight or nine big huskies in one big massive brawl to open your eyes to the brutish reality of basically trying to manage these carnivores. I think it's one of the things that did in latter years put a lot of people off the dogs, was witnessing these fights and how brutal they can be. But in reality once you'd established yourself as the driver and effectively the leader of this pack they became a thing of the past. It became remarkable when they did happen; as opposed to in the early days when you first took over a team or a team was being formed, it was remarkable if you didn't have a fight. I was effectively with my team for nearly two years and I'm sure in the last year the fights, you could have counted them on one hand.

[Part 2 0:06:53] Lee: Did you go in there and break up a fight or was it better to let it resolve itself?

Sweeny: No you had to break it up for two reasons; one you had to establish your authority over the dogs and secondly you had to stop them ripping each other to bits. In the early days these fights would result in torn ears, punctured skin, damaged paws; effectively it could lead to the death of a dog. There was never any tolerance for dog fights; it was just how brutally you quelled these fights was possibly the question.

[Part 2 0:07:34] Lee: What was your battle tactic?

Sweeny: The older guys like Ben and Dave always recommended and went by the old fashioned system of carrying a short length of rope, and that was used to hit the dogs over the snout or back of the legs or wherever to try and dissuade them. Physically you had to just get in there, grab them by the harnesses and collars and just try and drag them apart;

quite shocking when you're trying to haul these animals that weight 50 or 60kgs each and they're just in this massive snarling ball of fur and teeth. I don't think anyone who hasn't seen a team dog fight would realise how intimidating and vicious it could actually be.

[Part 2 0:08:35] Lee: Did you always succeed?

Sweeny: Well you always had to stop the fight. How quickly you did it is another matter. It did require brutality. I know it sounds difficult to pet owners but you've got to appreciate that these animals are there to settle some long drawn out feuds [laughs] and they're not going to let go until they've got what they want and that's basically their underling defeated and lying on the ground in a pile of torn fur. It struck me that the sooner you got in and the more brutal you were the quicker you stopped the fights and the quicker you established your pecking order and your dominance over the team. I know it sounds cruel but that seems to be the way that traditionally the management of the team was done.

[Part 2 0:09:54] Lee: In your time at Rothera in the early 90's what were the dogs being used for because skidoos were everywhere weren't they?

Sweeny: Yea, effectively by the early 80's the skidoos had replaced the dog teams as the main method of transport for field parties. But they were kept on, initially as an insurance against skidoos not working, but then they became a very important part of the recreation on base and there was a lot of arguments right up until the dogs actually left, of the very tangible welfare benefits that the dogs provided on base, even if they weren't a team, even if it had got to the stage that there was only 3 or 4 dogs around, or even 1 or 2 dogs on the base that it's this facility for affection and confidence that anybody who has a pet would recognise. Really the dogs were there for this recreational travel in the winter and during the summer and I guess they did provide the welfare sort of comfort

[Part 2 0:11:21] Lee: Therapy

Sweeny: Yea, yea.

[Part 2 0:11:24] Lee: How did they break the news to you that the dogs were going to be phased out?

Sweeny: I'm fairly sure I was aware before we went down that the days of the dogs were numbered. At that stage the Antarctic Treaty had been

signed and was in effect, and that recognised that all non-indigenous species except man would have to be removed. Don't think it ever came as a shock. I'm fairly sure I was aware of it right from day one that the days were numbered.

[Part 2 0:12:04] Lee: Did you sympathise with that strategy? Did you say 'well fare enough'?

Sweeny: There were some very vocal voices within BAS and particularly 'Bunny' Fuchs⁵ who said that this was all a load of nonsense. So it was very hard if you were naturally inclined to think the dogs were a good thing, it was very hard to hear somebody like 'Bunny' Fuchs saying that the justifications for removing them were spurious and to sympathise with that decision to remove the dogs. Whereas I guess we recognised that it was going to happen because the Australians had got rid of theirs, the Argentinians had got rid of theirs. I think we were aware that they were going and that you can't fight City Hall sort of thing. Bunny Fuchs wasn't in charge anymore and (...)

[Part 2 0:13:13] Lee: David Drewry was in charge and he was also reluctant for the dogs to go. But it was if you like a gesture of unity with the other Antarctic Treaty countries that the British Antarctic Survey sacrificed the dogs in order to comply with the world

Sweeny: Yea. I think in general people felt the dogs were a good thing and they were a very positive influence on base and we had a lot to learn from them and they were that fantastic link with the past. I think there was a general resignation that the dogs were going and that was it, that was the price of the new modern world.

[Part 2 0:14:00] Lee: And you were upset by that or you just went along with it?

Sweeny: When you are presented with a fait accompli even before you entered into the whole experience, then you couldn't get too upset about it. I became a lot more attached to the dogs and I remember it being a lot more upsetting when they did actually leave but that was two years later and I was going with them. It was almost as much an experience of the end of this era and not just from my point of view, the fact that nobody else was going to experience this that I felt sad for and felt disappointed in. I don't think at any stage we held David Drewry or even the Antarctic Treaty as being to blame for this situation. I think

⁵ Sir Vivian Fuchs, Director of BAS 1958-73

most people regarded it as just a reality of modern politics and international relations.

[Part 2 0:15:22] Lee: You did the last Antarctic dog sledging trip. Was that just because you were there or were you specifically chosen for that? Or have I got that wrong?

Sweeny: In my first winter I became, we had the doggy man on base, but I became his understudy in my first winter and therefore logically I was to become the doggy man for the last winter. It would have been quite logical that because I was working that closely with the dogs that I would take the dogs out for the final season. But I do remember discussing it with one of the other wintering GA's who at that stage had taken over the Huns and was running the Huns whether he wanted to do that trip. Because I was the doggy man for the last winter then the project really fell into my lap.

[Part 2 0:16:36] Lee: Did you have to pull rank or was it just understood?

Sweeny: No there wasn't any pulling of rank. It was understood that because I'd immersed myself so much in the dog team and the management of all the dogs through the last winter, and it wasn't all beer and skittles, there was quite a few unfortunate activities that had to be undertaken. Dogs had to be culled and pups had to be culled and there was quite a few seals had to be shot and things like that. Because I didn't flinch from doing any of those things and did those things, and because I was making such a good hand of running my team, I think it was recognised that it was going to be my project. I was quite happy if somebody else wanted to do it to discuss that, but I didn't feel that Brian the other GA was particularly keen to do that project. As it turned out the alternative summer project that was offered to him was quite a nice project, it was down in the Ellsworth Mountains with a geologist, so we both were quite happy in what we were doing. Within base for that last trip there wasn't anybody more qualified and there wasn't anyone who probably wanted to do it as much as I did.

[Part 2 0:18:27] Lee: Was it a realistic scientific trip or was it just a token expedition, token jolly?

Sweeny: Yes

[Part 2 0:18:38] Lee: Which?

Sweeny: Liz Morris was very keen that the dogs would be deployed in the last season and she did her best to come up with a project that didn't depend on huge amounts of travel but was a viable project none the less. So it's hard really to say whether the project, well definitely the project was made up to make use of the dogs, but that's not to say it didn't actually perform any useful function. You've spoken to John Killingbeck?

[Part 2 0:19:25] Lee: John Killingbeck yea.

Sweeny: John was employed to survey and I did the ice cores and temperature measurements. I think yes we came back with some useful science, but yes the project was effectively designed for the dogs.

[Part 2 0:19:44] Lee: It was quite a media project as well, wasn't it? A fair bit of coverage in the press wasn't there?

Sweeny: I don't know because I didn't see any [laughs]. Yes in the early stages Liz Morris, have you spoken to Liz?

[Part 2 0:20:00] Lee: I know who she is, I haven't yet.

Sweeny: I think any archive material on the dogs should record Liz's views because she was probably the most vocal supporter of keeping the dogs and their benefits on base amongst the department heads back in Cambridge. She was very keen that something useful was done and something was done to mark their passing. And so she did come up with this project at quite an early stage and yes as you suggest, there had always been the intention that this would be recorded using a film crew but as I just mentioned earlier there had been problems getting industry funding for this type of jaunt. The same summer, this American group had planned to travel to the South Pole with dog teams using the cover of the British still having dogs there as justification to bring in dog teams from America. A private expedition was going to fly them down to (...) what was the name of that place?

[Part 2 0:21:30] Lee: Palmer?

Sweeny: No, in the Ellsworth Mountains, ANI⁶ camp at Patriot Hills and then travel from Patriot Hills to the South Pole with dogs, but the plane

⁶ ANI – Adventure Network International was a private company that provided expedition support and tours to the interior of Antarctica

crashed on the way in. It was an old guy called Norman [pause] I can't remember what his name was

[Part 2 0:21:55] Lee: Leppard?

Sweeny: No, no he was an American and he'd been down with Byrd⁷ in the fifties.

[Part 2 0:22:06] Lee: So it never happened?

Sweeny: It never happened

[Part 2 0:22:09] Lee: So you were the last trip?

Sweeny: So we were the last trip but I think the industry funding had gone to film this trip with this 82 year old American who was going to travel from Patriot Hills to the South Pole with dogs, which never happened but it stalled the (...)

[Part 2 0:22:29] Lee: What were feelings like at Rothera the day you got back from that last trip, the last turning of a paw in earnest?

Sweeny: It had been a very unusual summer in that traditionally since the 1970's the dogs had always been on camp during the summer months, but of course for the last summer the dogs weren't at Rothera so all those people who would usually be quite heavily involved in looking after the dogs and walking them, exercising them, running them had nothing to do with them, and then the dogs reappeared. I remember being asked as soon as I got the dogs back on the span⁸, they came out of the aircraft and put them back on the spans, and myself and John went back up into the main base building to have a cup of tea. I remember somebody asking me 'did you have a great time?' At that stage I was getting quite anxious about the next stage, packing the dogs up and taking them out, that that's all I could see. I couldn't see what had just happened and I couldn't see the fantastic experience that I'd just had. I was worried and anxious about what was going to happen next.

[Part 2 0:24:10] Lee: Who hatched this plan to take a number of dogs, the last remaining dogs to the Northern hemisphere? Where did that idea come from? Because they could have just been put down couldn't they?

⁷ Richard Evelyn Byrd – American aviator and Polar Explorer

⁸ Wire cable, anchored at each end, used to fasten dogs to stop them wandering off and/or fighting.

Sweeny: They could have been put down yea.

[Part 2 0:24:23] Lee: Said he heartlessly. Well they could have done, several were

Sweeny: Yes. There'd been a number of discussions about this and there certainly wouldn't have been much co-operation on base with the idea of the dogs being destroyed. It was certainly a potential end to the problem and it was an end that other bases had used and had been used within BAS at other times. It wouldn't have been completely out of form for BAS to say 'don't bother bringing them back. When you've done this trip just shoot them and that's it' and that had happened before. But I think there was no appetite for that sort of end either in BAS, on base or heaven forbid if that had got into the press the uproar would have been unmanageable. So the field operations manager I'm sure he had many a sleepless night figuring out how he was going to end all this and what he was going to do with these dogs. In the summer preceding the last year John Hall had had to go and try and find some place for these dogs to go to because I think it was a non-runner that BAS was going to deal with destroying the dogs on base or bringing them back to the Falklands and having somebody else do the job there. There had to be some neater solution or a nicer end to the story. I'm not 100% sure how John Hall struck upon the contacts that he did except that there was an ex Fid working over in New Hampshire, Maine and in that area New England, and he had contacts with these American dog drivers who in turn had contacts up in northern Quebec. Originally the huskies had come from Labrador and Quebec so there's a whole story about how the Inuit communities in that particular area lost their huskies and it's quite a sad story. It was familiar to us from reading the *Polar Record* that in the late 60's and 70's the Royal Canadian Mounted Police had basically culled all the huskies in these villages and so it seemed like a very fitting end that the dogs would eventually go back to these villages and replace some of the stock that had been either stolen or bought or culled.

[Part 2 0:28:05] Lee: You've written quite a bit about that trip north, I'm just wondering all these years later, we're now looking at 16 or 17 years later, just give me one or two ideas of the stand out moments from that expedition north, right from leaving Rothera to arriving on the Canadian coast

Sweeny: Bringing the dogs back to Stanley, we flew all the dogs on board the Dash-7 aircraft so we had these 22 odd kennelled boxes on the plane and myself and John Killingbeck

[Part 2 0:28:50] Lee: This was costing BAS money wasn't it?

Sweeny: Serious amount of money yes. All of us were flown back to Stanley. We landed at Stanley and I remember we had a welcoming party there and we took the dogs down to the agricultural research centre which is at the back of Stanley and we spanned the dogs out there. That was quite interesting to see the dogs on grass [laughs]. They'd never had that experience yet it was completely natural.

[Part 2 0:29:26] Lee: How did they react? How did they cope?

Sweeny: Fine, nothing fazed them. Travelling in planes didn't faze them; running on roads didn't faze them. While we were in Stanley to exercise them I used to run them attached to the front of a quad. You weren't allowed to take dogs into Stanley, that's a long standing municipal rule there, but I could run them from the agricultural research station down to the airport and I used to do that in the early morning. The dogs were fine, I could steer them to the left hand side of the road, or to the right hand side of the road or round the bends. It was no problem at all they were very disciplined. It was quite a big day then when we flew them from the Falklands back to Brize Norton. Initially the RAF had wanted the dogs to be tranquilised but we didn't. The veterinary opinion was that wasn't really necessary and not really manageable either for that length of time, so the dogs were all packed into their boxes again and they were all perfectly behaved on the plane. We arrived at Brize Norton in the early hours of the morning and we were met by a very efficient group of people from a big pet handling business situated outside Heathrow. If I remember correctly the dogs were loaded straight into some sort of truck and off they went to this place just outside Heathrow. They were all put in the kennels there and they were fine.

[Part 2 0:31:36] Lee: John Killingbeck says *Hello* magazine turned up?

Sweeny: The following day there was a bit of a press event. Certainly British Airways were quite keen to make a bit of publicity.

[Part 2 0:31:51] Lee: Funny that

Sweeny: They had a picture of one of their hostesses with Tom, one of my dogs, one of my lead pair, up on his hind legs with his paws on this girls shoulder looking her in the eye [laughs] In fact that picture was on the paper the following day when we left Heathrow. So I remember it all being organised very efficiently in the UK, the dogs were kept only one

night in this place just outside Heathrow and then the following day we were off again bound for Boston.

[Part 2 0:32:41] Lee: And you were picked to do this simply because you'd taken the last trip?

Sweeny: I volunteered to do it

[Part 2 0:32:50] Lee: Was there competition for the honour?

Sweeny: No, I don't think so, no. I don't think John had been particularly that bothered about doing it because of course he had his family to get back to.

[Part 2 0:33:05] Lee: So it fell to you naturally?

Sweeny: Yes, it just fell to me naturally. I had been the doggie man, I knew the dogs and there wasn't really anybody else to do it to be honest.

[Part 2 0:33:15] Lee: Whose idea was it then that the dogs should actually go, I forget the name of the place they ended up in, somewhere in (...)

Sweeny: Inukjuak

[Part 2 0:33:21] Lee: Yea. So some of the dogs actually got there under their own steam didn't they? You drove them?

Sweeny: Yes, that's right yea

[Part 2 0:33:28] Lee: So who plotted that scheme? Was that you?

Sweeny: No that was Kevin and Polly the American couple, Mahoosuc Guide Company and they'd been running dog sled trips up the side of Hudson Bay using their own dogs and taking fare paying passengers. They decided that these communities which had lost their huskies in the 60's and 70's, would be a fitting home for these dogs to go back to. They organised a trip which combined taking some of their usual fare paying passengers and also taking the BAS dogs, the Admirals, my team of dogs under their own steam from a place called Le Grande which is in the bottom of the Hudson Bay network up to this village of Inukjuak, which is about 200 miles further up the coast

[Part 2 0:34:52] Lee: So you were sledging in company?

Sweeny: Yea. Effectively their dogs moved at a lot faster pace and we lost sight of them most days but our dogs just plodded on and were capable of carrying much heavier weights and weren't taking anything like the maintenance that their dogs were taking. So effectively we travelled in company.

[Part 2 0:35:22] Lee: And again were the dogs completely unfazed by being surrounded by trees?

Sweeny: I remember on the way up, where we were staying in Maine, it was quite open and we used to run the dogs. I can't remember being able to run the dogs particularly well there, maybe there wasn't enough snow but when we got up into Quebec there was plenty of snow. I remember going out one day, taking the dogs for a bit of a trip because it took us about 2 or 3 days to drive up to our start point and I remember one morning taking the dogs for a run and hitching up the lead dog and heading off into the woods. I was thinking 'this is going to be weird for these dogs, they've never seen trees before and I'm going to ask her to go past that tree and turn left and then turn right' and she did completely unfazed! Nothing fazed these dogs; they just seemed to have confidence in whatever they were doing. Striking it was.

[Part 2 0:36:37] Lee: Did the huskies do what dogs normally do to trees? Or did they have to learn that all over again?

Sweeny: I suppose they would have to learn that all over again [laughs]

[Part 2 0:36:48] Lee: From scratch?

Sweeny: Yea from scratch.

[Part 2 0:36:49] Lee: So did they use the trees?

Sweeny: To pee on?

[Part 2 0:36:52] Lee: Yea!

Sweeny: Well we didn't stop long enough for them to [laughs]

[Part 2 0:37:00] Lee: What I am trying to get at is an example of them either adapting or not adapting to their new environment.

Sweeny: I guess they adapted to it but it didn't seem like anything fazed them. They took everything in their stride. For instance when we travelled

from Maine up to northern Quebec, we had to put these dogs into tiny little boxes on the top of a pickup truck. These boxes were about 2 foot wide, 3 foot high and maybe 3 foot 6 deep. I thought 'the dogs are not going to go into these boxes; they're not going to like it'. But they just got in there, just took to it and they had to spend all day in these boxes as we travelled. Obviously they could lie down in the boxes, but the boxes had little square mesh doors on them that they could look out. That's how dogs are transported over there.

[Part 2 0:38:26] Lee: If it hadn't been you, if it had been a complete stranger who was asking them to get into these boxes, would it have been a different story?

Sweeny: Yea possibly. I'm sure it worked reasonably well for the dogs that there was somebody, some constant thing about their existence at that stage when everything else was changing.

[Part 2 0:38:53] Lee: When you got to your destination what sort of reception did you have?

Sweeny: We got a very warm welcome in the village. A big crowd turned out to meet us as we came off this frozen riverbed. I made sure we put a bit of a show on by driving the dogs in a fan trace rather than (...) traditionally in the Antarctic we'd use a line trace where the dogs are in pairs with a lead dog, but the traditional Inuit way of driving the dogs is what's called a fan trace where each dog is on its own lead and the dogs are running side by side, the whole team are running side by side. I did used to experiment with that in the Antarctic but it has its draw backs when travelling on crevassed terrain. That's where the paired trace potentially works better but the fan trace is ideal on sea ice. I remember coming into the village driving the dogs on the fan trace and there was a big crowd turned out to greet us. The following day I was asked to go and do an interview on the local radio station and through an interpreter I was asked a number of questions about where the dogs had been, and where they'd come from. Then there was a phone in where various people in the village phoned in

[Part 2 0:40:48] Lee: In French?

Sweeny: No this was in Inuktitut. There was various comments but a lot of comments to say they hadn't seen a team of dogs like that in 40 or 50 years. Their fathers used to have teams of dogs like that, and they felt very proud to see a team like that and they like to hear the words of commands. The words of commands that we used for the dogs was still the same, there was still the Inuktitut words.

[Part 2 0:41:25] Lee: Were you aware that this was a momentous occasion and you were the key figure in this?

Sweeny: No I don't think so

[Part 2 0:41:34] Lee: Is that just modesty talking?

Sweeny: No because I think it was a half finished, I don't like to say a half-baked project but it was certainly a half finished project. Getting the dogs there was only half the enterprise

[Part 2 0:41:56] Lee: At that moment it was a momentous occasion. You weren't to know that things would not work out as you'd hoped

Sweeny: No, that's right. But also it was the end of the line for me and whatever feelings of accomplishment I might have had; it was also going to be the end. [pause]

[Part 2 0:42:31] Lee: We now know that the dogs didn't do terribly well. Gradually they began to fade away and die. Two or three were saved and brought back south again by some American friends of yours. Looking back now over that, what would you have done differently? It's always easier to say this in hindsight but I get the impression you may have had a plan B if you'd known what was going to happen.

Sweeny: I remember in the final summer writing to every contact I knew and I didn't know that many people dog sledging, running dog sledging expeditions or outfits but there was plenty of them in the northern United States, in Norway, in Alaska and in retrospect I think there was two ideal solutions. One is that the dogs should have been retired when they got back to the UK, put into quarantine and offered to ex Fids as pets to see out their days. That would have probably been more or less the most sensible and best for the animals. It would have been a disappointment to see a perfectly viable working team broken up, and effectively by the time we got back to the UK there was only one proper team left, but it would have been better for the dogs as individuals. The second best would have been if the team could have gone as a unit to somebody who appreciated modern dog management techniques and looked after them as they had been looked after in the Antarctic. In fact they went back to a community who'd lost the knowledge in looking after dogs and in fact had never really had the standard of care available that the dogs had had in the Antarctic. With the best intentions of the world the solution that did present itself wasn't a good one at all. The dogs were basically abandoned in a place

where they weren't going to be looked after and not entirely because the people didn't want to look after them, but they certainly weren't aware of how we looked after them, how the dogs had been looked after in the past and what we would have expected for them in the future.

[Part 2 0:45:41] Lee: Reading your accounts one gets the impression that the Inuit's treated the dogs as they always had done which was with less care and attention particularly in the summer when they couldn't earn their living

Sweeny: That's right yea. You have to be culturally sensitive to the way the Inuit had survived and also why they were at the state that they were at that stage with no viable husky teams of their own. But in reality our dogs shouldn't have been thrown in there as a half thought out project. What should have happened is I should have stayed there for another year and tried to teach a group of younger people how we looked after dogs or perhaps if a Canadian had volunteered or an ex-Fid who'd been working in Canada or Alaska had volunteered to spend a year with a local community and our dogs to integrate how they would look after our dogs and how our dogs would fit into this new environment. Personally it was a difficult time for me coming into that village at the end. It was the end of the road as far as myself and the Admirals went and I recognised that. I don't think I had any major misgivings about how the dogs would be looked after at that stage. I felt that the chap we were giving them to would look after them and certainly he gave us assurances that he would look after them. But it turned out that those assurances weren't really honoured and within 6 months it became clear that things weren't going very well.

[Part 2 0:48:09] Lee: Did you go back and rescue the 3 dogs?

Sweeny: No. A Canadian couple became involved and in fact they were our conscience really. So Liane Benoit and Louis Molgat became involved in the project in the early stages. I think they probably had the greatest idea of what conditions were like up there and probably were aware that the project was half baked. The Americans involved were very strong characters and had these Canadians on board more or less as a 'fig leaf' to guarantee their safe passage through Quebec. But Liane and Louis served as our conscience really afterwards and followed up on the care of the dogs and when it became evident that the dogs weren't being looked after, did arrange to send a vet up to Inukjuak to check on the dogs, to try and advise on how the dogs should be looked

after and eventually organised for the remaining dogs to be brought back down to Quebec to where they were living just outside Montreal.

[Part 2 0:49:52] Lee: Andrew Bellows who I talked to in the autumn thinks that there was some sperm that was retained. Is that Biff's sperm?

Sweeny: That's right, yes

[Part 2 0:50:03] Lee: But he does not know what happened to it. I wonder whether you know what happened to it.

Sweeny: It was put into storage by Liane and Louis and the vet that actually went and did this research project or went up to Inukjuak to check on the dogs, I think he stored it free of charge in his freezers and then he was moving practice or sold his practice and the people who took over wanted to know what to do with this stuff. Because they didn't know the ins and outs of the story they were a little bit more hard headed and said 'look we are going to have to charge you storage fees for this and what are you going to do. Do you want them; do you want us to store it?' At that stage Liane and Louis got in touch with us again to see did we want to do anything with it. Funnily enough at that stage the main emphasis in BAS seemed to be about, or certainly within the BAS Club, seemed to be about getting a bronze memorial of the dogs to be put outside, to be put some place at the BAS headquarters. And this thing came up at the same time and it was more or less kicked into the long grass really.

[Part 2 0:51:44] Lee: Would the semen have been viable at this late stage?

Sweeny: I don't know. But there isn't any shortage of good quality sledging dogs in northern Canada, Greenland. What is lacking is good quality animal management and it doesn't need our dog's sperm for that. Our dogs were not a particularly genetically pure or unique strain. There was regular mixtures of new blood and even blood from the Argentine and New Zealand husky lines in there as well so our dogs weren't particularly unique except in their recent history which really isn't long enough to make them genetically distinct.

[Part 2 0:52:42] Lee: So you're trying to preserve romance rather than biology really?

Sweeny: I think so yea. It would have been much more useful to try and pass on some of our limited dog management skills rather than the individual beasts. Even within that there's a story because the techniques that we were using in the 1990's to look after the dogs hadn't moved on very

much from the 1940's, and yet at the same time in Alaska and the Yukon dog management had really come into the 21st century with dog nutrition becoming an absolute science. For instance in Northern Canada and Alaska these long distance races like the Iditarod and the Yukon Quest were pushing the management and welfare of dogs to new limits yet none of these techniques and methods or science was coming back to us in the Antarctic, which was very sad because a number of field assistants who had cut their teeth so to speak with the huskies in the Antarctic, went on to do some very interesting journeys in the Yukon and in Alaska and yet none of that information and skills and techniques were passed back to where they'd originally learnt their skills.

[Part 2 0:54:34] Lee: Was that your last job for BAS, to take the dogs north?

Sweeny: No I went back for two more seasons

[Part 2 0:54:42] Lee: As a GA?

Sweeny: As a GA

[Part 2 0:54:45] Lee: And what in the end prompted you to step away from BAS?

Sweeny: It was a number of personal reasons really. Settling down with Sharon, my family asked me to come and help in the business because the business hadn't been doing very well, so they were the main reasons really.

[Part 2 0:55:12] Lee: How did you feel about your, is it 5 or 6 years that you were with BAS? I normally ask this of old men, you're still quite a young man in your middle 40's so you haven't got the same perspective. Do you feel the Antarctic will be an abiding key memory for you?

Sweeny: I think what links most people that will gather at the BAS Club reunions is that we all probably feel the same about the Antarctic and that is that the Antarctic was probably the best experience of our lives. I've had lots of ups and downs and I often think that no matter how bad things got afterwards, certainly over the last few years we've had financial troubles with running a small business that having had the years working in the Antarctic with BAS, I'm not owed anything. I've had my fun, I've had the most fantastic experiences, I've met people that I'll never forget and I think your whole life can't be like that. There's got to be a peak some place and for most of us the Antarctic represents that peak.

[Part 2 0:56:54] Lee: Do you find yourself utilising that Antarctic experience in your work, in your everyday life these days? Do you every so often think ‘ah yea I got that from the Antarctic’?

Sweeny: Yea I do. Because I work outdoors and because I do quite a lot of manual work a lot of time involving ropes, involving small machinery. There probably isn't a day that I somehow don't think of the Antarctic. Certainly a week wouldn't go by when some time or other something wouldn't remind me about working in the Antarctic. I'll have to say that I came away from BAS on a real high. I had a fantastic last season, my last two seasons were fantastically enjoyable and I actually probably found them although quite different from the final dog journey, very much in the spirit of real GA-ing, real travel with skidoos and interesting terrain and generally very enjoyable and challenging. I made my decision to stop working for BAS for various reasons but not because I didn't enjoy working for BAS. I think like many of us if somebody phoned tomorrow and said ‘we need somebody, would you be available?’ I'd have to do some discussions with Sharon but then I'd be packing my bags [laughs].

[Part 2 0:59:08] Lee: Have you ever considered going back as a tourist? Every year now there seem to be reunion trips

Sweeny: I'm sure the time will come when I would go back but I don't have the money and I don't feel that I'm old enough to be a tourist [laughs]. I was working in my first season with BAS, I was working with Ben Hodges who was working his last couple of seasons, and basically he worked until he was 60. So I don't see why anybody shouldn't work in the Antarctic until they're 60. So as I'm still a few years from 60, I would say there's no reason why I shouldn't go back down and work there again. Except for various family and technical reasons but I don't think age is necessarily a barrier to working in the Antarctic. Certainly the more memorable relationships I've taken away from the Antarctic are with those older people who've continued to work in the Antarctic till BAS said ‘That's it, there's your bus pass off you go!’

[Part 2 1:00:40] Lee: It's been a real pleasure John, thank you very much

Sweeny: You're welcome.

[Part 2 1:00:42]

<ENDS>

Possible Extracts:

- Time in the RAF [Part 1 0:01:04]
- The interview for BAS [Part 1 0:07:18]
- First impressions of Rothera and the trip down south [Part 1 0:14:50]
- Comparisons between BAS and the military [Part 1 0:23:47]
- Tensions between staff at Rothera [Part 1 0:28:30]
- Hot Water drilling Project [Part 1 0:39:38]
- Geology trip to the transitions zone between Graham and Palmer Lands [Part 1 0:47:34]
- The experience of patting whales [Part 1 0:55:40]
- Becoming the driver of the Admirals dog team [Part 2 0:00:46]
- The last Antarctic dog sledging trip [Part 2 0:15:22]
- Taking the last dogs to the Northern hemisphere [Part 2 0:24:10]
- Arriving in Inukjuak [Part 2 0:38:53]
- The fate of the dogs in Inukjuak [Part 2 0:42:31]