

JOHN TOLSON

Edited transcript of a video recording of John Tolson interviewed in Oxford by Chris Eldon Lee on the 25th August 2011. BAS Archives AD6/24/1/132. Transcribed by Andy Smith, 15th September 2019.

Part One

[Part 1 0:00:09] Lee: My first question is: I need your name, place and date of birth.

Tolson: I'm Jack Tolson, perhaps John to some people, but mainly Jack to BAS members. I was born 2nd of June 1949.

[Part 1 0:00:25] Lee: Where?

Tolson: In Aylesbury.

[Part 1 0:00:27] Lee: Why the confusion over your Christian name?

Tolson: Well going back to my early days at sea, I was on a cadet ship with British India. And we had twelve cadets and an English bosun. It was a full working ship but the bosun never quite got to remember all of our names. In fact I don't think he remembered any of our names, so we were all Jack. Simple as that. I think I put on the back of a T-shirt, I just wrote 'Jack' and it stuck, and it stuck for my entire career at sea. It's quite convenient, or was quite convenient in the old days when somebody would ring up for me, and if it was a Jack they wanted, I knew it was a sea friend and if it was a John, I knew it was a land-based friend.

[Part 1 0:01:19] Lee: So you purposely kept the 'Jack' Christian name into your BAS years?

Tolson: Yes, it just carried on through my entire time at sea. Before I joined BAS, I was Jack, and because, I suppose, friends of mine who had been on the cadet ship with me were also in BAS, it just naturally followed on. It was simple; I didn't need to tell anybody 'You have got to call me Jack' or 'You can call me John'.

[Part 1 0:01:47] Lee: Tell me about your parents.

Tolson: My parents were Oxford based, from when we were children. My father was a building contractor, which he really started after the war, and had a house in North Oxford, and eventually, some years later (I was about four or five) moved up to this magnificent spot here, which is to the south of Oxford, and having built this house in his spare time, more or less. So that was a wonderful childhood home, this, and now it has become my home. But fantastic parents, very very liberal, with discipline. You couldn't have it all your own way, but great great parents.

[Part 1 0:02:44] Lee: What kind of education did you have?

Tolson: Well I went to a preparatory school; I went to the Dragon School in Oxford, and from there I went to a minor public school: Oakham, up in Rutland, which I

detested. And the reason is quite simple: the Dragon School was so fantastic that any school after that would have had to have been a failure. I'm not so sure that Oakham was a failure but I certainly was, academically. I just couldn't hack it. It was worse than a prison sentence.

[Part 1 0:03:21] Lee: Did you never consider running away, or did your parents not [?? inaudible]

Tolson: Oh yes, I considered running away. I just did not have the guts to do it. I remember on one occasion, I was going back to school in the January term, and I wasn't going to go back and I thought 'Right, this is it. I am taking the bike and I am going.' Well I got down as far as the end of the drive and it was thick snow and I thought 'Sod this. I'm coming back, and off to face another term at school. But on a serious level, I probably never had the guts to run away from school itself.

[Part 1 0:04:01] Lee: Was there any seagoing interest in your ancestors?

Tolson: Not that I'm aware of. I think I had a great great uncle on my mother's side, who was a pilot in Australia, but beyond that, no. Our family had really been the Army, if you are going to look at career backgrounds – Army or Royal Air Force.

[Part 1 0:04:33] Lee: So why did you opt for the sea, then?

Tolson: Well it's a case of running away – as simple as that.

[Part 1 0:04:38] Lee: It was?

Tolson: Oh yes, that ultimately became the running away. My mother of course wanted me to join the Royal Navy but being the little rebel that I was, that was it, finish, once she wished me to go off and become a midshipman. That was a definite no no. But the Merchant Navy had this flavour of romance, and of course in the mid-sixties, there still was an element of romance about going to sea. You didn't have massive container ships and even bigger oil tankers. You had ships that could actually go into ports and spend days and days in port, not that I really knew that at this time. It was just a romantic notion and I decided to do that.

[Part 1 0:05:26] Tolson: However I had, prior to getting selected to join British India, I had also thought about the Army and also one of my childhood fantasies: I wanted to be a lumberjack. But a friend of my father's said ... – he was chairman of International Rotary and he listened very patiently to me and my pleas for him to get me a lumberjack's job. He said 'I am off to Canada shortly.' Anyhow he came back – this was 1968. I had already got my job at sea, so I was no longer around but he had actually got me a job on oil rigs, which is all very ironic because it has gone full circle and now, forty years later I am actually involved in oil.

[Part 1 0:06:28] Lee: So back to the sea, then. So it wasn't a desire to go to sea; it was a desire to be somewhere else, was it?

Tolson: Absolutely. You couldn't be more right. I certainly didn't want to drive a desk. I didn't want to be in an office, and I didn't really want to be in England. It didn't leave many choices.

[Part 1 0:06:44] Lee: Why was that? What was wrong with England?

Tolson: There was nothing wrong with England. I think it was: (1) there was sense of adventure and I suppose that there was also this rebelliousness about school. I hated school so much in the last three years that I really did want to just get out of it, and going to sea seemed a good way of escape. And so in a sense, I suppose, it was a negative. I didn't go to sea because I really wanted to go to sea; I went to sea because I wanted to get out of what I had seen in England, and to be an accountant or any other of these professions was definitely not on.

[Part 1 0:07:32] Lee: One gets the impression that when you got to sea, you actually quite enjoyed it.

Tolson: Oh it was a complete turnaround. Once I got to sea, I realised that there was a vocation of some sort. I mean it was too early to know what was going to happen but I felt a deep commitment, an interest from myself and from those around, particularly in those early days on the cadet ships with British India, which was a fantastically good company. Very good at running their ships but also very good at training their cadets, and as navigating cadets, we got an exceptionally good grounding in both practical seamanship and the academic subjects.

[Part 1 0:08:20] Lee: So the moving into navigation work, was that a natural progression or was that something you became very keen on, interested in?

Tolson: Well going to sea initially, you were just immersed in so many things that the navigation actually didn't come immediately. You spent a lot of time on deck. You had classes with the instruction officers, so there were normal subjects. You had physics, maths, seamanship, navigation: they were all lectures. They could have been done in a college but it was done in a classroom on a ship, a proper full-scale working ship, so you had all of the various inputs. You felt involved and you were slowly slowly being immersed into this way of life. Navigation then was slowly drip-fed into us I suppose, because it was far too much to take on if you had never done anything like that before, you had never seen a sextant. What's a sextant? So it was a slow process.

[Part 1 0:09:37] Lee: All this, you took to it, navigation, because you did it again later on in life, didn't you?

Tolson: Yes. Going through with the training, you became, after three and a half years, you took your first set of exams, Second Mate's Certificate, and you were a qualified navigating officer in the old style,

[10 mins]

not with ... as today it's all press-button stuff. But that was the three and a half to four years I did with British India and by that time of course I had already seen an advertisement for the British Antarctic Survey, and wrote off whilst I was still a cadet.

And Bill Sloman it was who was in the BAS Office then, he wrote back to me and said ‘When you have got the qualification, re-apply.’ So that is what I did, about eighteen months later.

[Part 1 0:10:34] Lee: So what was your first awareness of this place called the Antarctic?

Tolson: My very vague awareness was as a schoolboy when I was about twelve and I had actually won a prize, a book called *Far Afield* and it had about twelve world-class adventures in it, and of course Fuchs’s Trans-Antarctic was in that and I read that and it was one that did stick in my mind. Oddly enough, I hadn’t read anything about Scott. I was completely unaware of Scott. I knew he existed but I didn’t know any of the details of the Scott expeditions, or Shackleton’s or any of the early pioneers, but it was this Fuchs Trans-Antarctic one. But that was it; I was a twelve-year-old and it was gone again in a few moments later.

[Part 1 0:11:40] Lee: So why were you attracted to applying to BAS?

Tolson: Well I was very lucky as a cadet. I got bumped up to be sailing as an acting Third Officer, which meant that ... I hadn’t got the certificate so therefore I couldn’t sail as a Third Officer but you were doing the Third Officer’s duties. You were doing a full navigating watch, and I think I could see ... Again it was this sense of adventure kicking in. But I really didn’t want to be doing the routine on a commercial ship. I had been on cargo ships; I had been on passenger ships, and yes, they were interesting but I didn’t really see that lasting. And it was this idea of hands-on navigation, hands-on seamanship and British Antarctic Survey happened to advertise. Had it been ocean salvage or supply boats, it could have been one of those I suppose. In essence it was because there was a potential for hands-on stuff.

[Part 1 0:12:44] Lee: So it was the seamanship opportunities, rather than the continent itself, which was attracting you?

Tolson: By the time I read about BAS, it was both. There was a fantastic continent. Again I had seen nothing barring a few pictures of it, but it was that idea of this magnificent continent and the seamanship, and the navigation, yes.

[Part 1 0:13:10] Lee: So you took Bill Sloman’s advice and you applied again?

Tolson: I re-applied and I had been very careful because in the mean time I had got my Second Mate’s Certificate and I knew that there would be a job coming up on the *Bransfield*, and I didn’t know when the ... [phone rings; recording stopped, then restarted]

[Part 1 0:13:34] Lee: You took Bill Sloman’s advice and reapplied to BAS?

Tolson: Yes. By now I had got my Second Mate’s Certificate and I made jolly sure that I was working on the UK coast so that I could get an interview if it came up. And I knew there was going to be an interview because a friend of mine, Eddie Dewhurst, who was now the Third Mate (he had been the Fourth Mate on the trip before) – we had sailed together in British India – and he told me that there was going to be a

Fourth Mate's place so I knew. I knew there would be something and I was hell-bent on getting it. So I worked on the UK coast, doing short trips to Russia, North Africa, Caribbean, and fortunately Tom Woodfield, who was the captain, let it be known that there was a job going. And I applied and I don't know if there was anybody else who applied but I got the job anyhow. I walked across the docks from another ship that I was on and there we are; I got the job.

[Part 1 0:14:43] Lee: So was it a pressurised interview or was it just a gentleman's chat?

Tolson: It was a gentleman's chat, yes. I was surprised. Well I suppose I was surprised in hindsight because I have heard afterwards that people have had to go for interviews sitting before two or three people, but this was just sitting in his cabin. I was Second Mate on a reefer ship, so I was going prepared to take the Fourth Mate's job which was certainly a financial step down. And if you are being prissy about it, going from Second Mate down, not Third Mate but Fourth Mate: that's a long big drop, but I was more interested in getting into the Antarctic Survey.

[Part 1 0:15:32] Lee: What do you remember of the interview, bearing in mind it was fort years ago?

Tolson: Surprisingly, I remember quite a bit. I was so anxious, I suppose, that I wanted to impress Tom Woodfield, that I told him all the things that I did. And actually a Second Mate in this particular company (it was Fyffes), you had to do all the crew wages. Obviously you had to do all the navigation, so there was an awful lot of additional stuff beyond, plus the Mate had been comatose for most of the trip and I was doing the Mate's job as well. So I actually had been doing quite a lot but I forcefully said this in the hope that it would impress him. I only saw him a few weeks ago and I discussed this with him. He didn't remember any of that but I certainly did. But no, it was a chat really; it was just asking me what I knew about navigation, and I kept feeding ...

[Part 1 0:16:49] Lee: So did BAS send a mandarin to be there beside him, or was it just you and Tom?

Tolson: It was just me and Tom, just sitting there together in his cabin.

[Part 1 016:54] Lee: A relaxing chat?

Tolson: Yes. Well he was perhaps relaxed; I'm not sure that I was.

[Part 1 0:16:58] Lee: Did he tell you on the spot?

Tolson: I think he did, yes. I can't be absolutely sure about that but if I didn't know it then, I knew it very very soon afterwards because I then gave my notice in to the company I was with.

[Part 1 0:17:17] Lee: What did you make of the *Bransfield*?

Tolson: Well I joined the *Bransfield* a few months later, in Husband's shipyard in Southampton. Of course it was a mess – big refit. I think when you join a ship in a refit like that, you get a completely different idea. It was just a mess. And it was a small ship in comparison to what I had been used to. Everybody says the same thing. You are going to smaller ships and I think I was probably underwhelmed by it and there didn't seem to be a sense of urgency. I'm sure there was in the minds of the senior officers, but here was this mess in Husband's shipyard and we were getting ready for an Antarctic cruise. But it just seemed to be chaotic and that is what I remember. I think it's what I remember about all of the early refits, that they were rather shambolic, but that was perhaps the nature of the Government organisation.

[Part 1 0:18:32] Tolson: Perhaps I am being harsh by saying that, but you weren't in and out of a dry dock and a refit quickly; it just seemed to linger on. But that also was the nature of how the ship were operating in those days back in the seventies. They would do their long trip in the Antarctic, then they would come home and from April/ May they would sit in the UK and have a refit, have a dry dock, and then they would prepare, back in September/ October to get off again. So there was, anyhow, this long period of time when they actually did nothing. All that changed in the late '70s/ early '80s.

[Part 1 0:19:12] Lee: So what was being done to the ship then? Was it mechanical work or carpentry?

Tolson: Yes, it was everything. The engines were overhauled. This, I think, with BAS was one of the things you had to do. You had to go knowing that everything was sound from the engineering perspective. You couldn't be fiddling around trying to do repairs in Southern waters. So there was an awful lot of high maintenance done. I don't think costs were spared. If something needed doing it was dealt with and the Chief Engineer would delegate and allow the engineers to make changes to equipment if it was felt necessary and obviously in a dry dock and a refit situation, the shore teams were doing that. On our side, on the deck side, everything was thoroughly maintained. All the electronic gear was being checked over by the manufacturers' representatives. So essentially the ship would sail at the start of a new season, in a pretty pristine condition.

[Part 1 0:20:30] Lee: So when it did take to sea, in the late autumn of '73, I guess, what was it like to sail in?

Tolson: I can remember the first trip. We got out beyond the Needles and sailing down towards the Lizard, and we always carried petrol in drums on the foredeck, and I remember them breaking loose. The wire supports freed up and the ship was leaping around, and with general seasickness I think I was feeling pretty seasick because – I suppose it was the size of the ship – I just wasn't used to something quite as small as that. And I think it was a slightly frightening moment because there was petrol, in these 45-gallon drums, rolling around on deck, and you didn't quite know what was going to happen next. Not an entirely totally dangerous situation, but not nice because the Chief Officer was out on deck, Stuart Lawrence, with a few of the crew, trying to effectively lasso these things, and the ship was heaving about.

[Part 1 0:21:55] Lee: Was that because the sea was particularly rough or was it just the poor sea-going quality of the boat?

Tolson: That trip, that was my first trip, and NPL (National Physical Laboratory), they had asked BAS if they could do some testing on board. And again it was Stuart Lawrence who was continually monitoring these tests that had to be done. It was connected with the steering gear, and we were going across the Atlantic to America where we had to go first to pick up American stores. And the ship did roll but by using two steering engines, and correcting very very quickly, we determined that the rolling effect was slightly minimised. There were other methods on board the ship, which actually didn't work very well. There were things called flume tanks, and I think we had lost the knack of operating those, and they were supposed to balance out the rolling effect. The strakes that ran down under the waterline, they I think had been systematically ripped off by ice and I think at that point they had not bothered to reinstall them, so you didn't have the benefit that they would have given in anti-rolling.

[Part 1 0:23:31] Tolson: Yes, it was a bit of a pig of a ship, the *Bransfield*. There's no getting away from that. She did roll quite hard, and being a short ship with a very heavy bow, she did thump hard and as you got further south, you began to appreciate her strengths but I can remember on occasions sitting on the tops of waves, and there were some very very big gaps that you were running down, into some very very big troughs, and everything was whitened out. You didn't see anything after that and the spray came over the wheelhouse, over the entire ship, and then slowly she would lift out. You were mightily relieved that the ship did lift out but also that the water spewed off the decks and that equipment hadn't been ripped off. It never ceased to amaze me, on any ship, how the equipment actually remains in place when you have got this enormous buffeting going on with the waves.

[Part 1 0:24:45] Lee: Did you have occasion to question your sanity at this point?

Tolson: I don't think it was so much sanity as my fear. I wasn't so worried about the ship diving into a heavy trough. What terrified me was when the ship did a heavy roll and occasionally you would go 40 – 45 degrees over, and depending where you were on the wave, you didn't quite know what was going to happen. Would it come back up again and then would it go the other way? And it was the rolling that frightened me. It was not exceptional rolling. Fifty degrees is getting nasty. I don't ever recall seeing 50 degrees on the inclinometer, but maybe I have been in those. But certainly 40s and 45s.

[Part 1 0:25:48] Lee: It's interesting psychology, isn't it, because obviously the ship hasn't sunk because it is still there? But you still have this sense that it might. Is that right?

Tolson: Yes. It is and how much of that is me? I wonder how much other people think like that. I sometimes wonder whether I was just plain nervous about it. I am certain that some of the Fids, probably all of the Fids, were very worried at 40 degrees (that's if they were even up, on the lower decks, because you are awfully close to the water then, and does it swing back heavily? But sanity – you mean sanity of perhaps going to sea at all? No, that never was a thought process. It was nervousness.

[Part 1 0:26:42] Lee: Did your confidence in the *Bransfield* increase as the weeks went by?

Tolson: Yes. I think that as you saw more and more of the heavy weather in the Antarctic, you began to appreciate that it was a pretty substantial The stability criteria that the ship had was very very good and it would have taken an awful lot to have thrown her right over, but you don't know. It has happened to others. We didn't really have any heavy icing-up ever. I remember occasions when the lower decks and the windlass on the foc'sle, that got fairly clogged up with freezing spray. But we never had any serious worries about topside icing, so therefore there was no heavy weight up high; it was accumulating down on the lower decks. So that was never a big concern. Potentially there is of course: ships in the past, fishing boats especially, have gone down.

[Part 1 0:27:53] Lee: What was the *Bransfield's* role in that first season? Where did you go with her and what did she do?

Tolson: Well we sailed from Southampton with about forty Fids. They were a combination of scientists, mechanics, carpenters, cooks – all sorts of trades and scientific personnel. The stores for the bases, the five bases that we had in those days, and also of course fuel for the bases. And that was our role: to deliver people, equipment, and to do transfers of people from bases, and then finally, at the end of the season, to bring those back who had either done two and a half years or perhaps a one-year trip. So it was a busy time from the moment we left. Or it seemed busy. I didn't like those journeys from London or Southampton down to Montevideo. It was a nice relaxing time going through the Tropics, although initially, for a few trips, we did these trips across to the US to Mayport and we picked up American stores for one of their bases, Palmer Station.

[Part 1 0:29:20] Tolson: But anyhow it was going across the Atlantic and then down. So either way, I found those tedious. I wanted to get down there; I wanted to be in the Antarctic again. Once you got to Montevideo – we always had a couple of days there for R & R. Goodness knows we had enough R & R's. Anyhow getting new stores on board and then that was the beginning. You weren't going to see any icebergs but it was there to Stanley and then a few days in Stanley generally, putting on a few more bits and pieces that needed to go there.

[Part 1 0:29:56] Lee: So was the ship well-loaded, shall we say? Or very well loaded or slightly too well loaded?

Tolson: No, she was never down to her marks. She was well loaded in the sense that stuff wouldn't shift, apart from those wretched drums on deck, and we knew they were always going to shift – just a damned nuisance. But the cargo down below: the English stevedores – as much as we all love to hate them, they did do a good job of stowing and the ship was not down to her marks. So there was a lot more space available. A lot more weight could have gone on her.

[Part 1 0:30:34] Lee: I presume you called at Stanley on the way South?

Tolson: Yes, from Montevideo we would go to Stanley, have our few days there, and generally we would take on some stores of some sort that had to go down to one or two of the bases. These were the days before flying so there were no aircraft coming into Stanley and picking up scientists. All the scientists had come with us so it was just equipment really. The Fids, in those early days, the 70s, they still had to get their kit from the BAS base in Port Stanley. So that was a trip up to the store to get bits and pieces.

[Part 1 0:31:27] Lee: How was that journey South socially, because I have learned over the years that the interview process for most Fids carried on whilst they were on board the ship, and the final decision about their Fid-worthiness was made in Stanley? So was there a sense of people shaking together, or did you see leaders emerging, or bonds forming?

Tolson: When the ship was still in the UK, the Fids would arrive the night before we sailed, so we would sail about lunch time; they would arrive the night before. There was a chap on board called the King Fid. Now the King Fid had been selected already, because of his prior knowledge of BAS and he had sailed in the ship as a Fid. So the King Fid was in charge of delegating all the Fids' duties. They had rosters because they had to do their own serving up of meals, do their own cleaning of their accommodations. He supervised that and I am sure that if there was any Fid who was, for some reason, not coming up to par, and that could have been for a number of reasons ... It could have been bad attitude as I have certainly seen. They would have been singled out by the Falkland Islands. And yes, I have actually seen a Fid sent back from the Falklands, but I think it is very rare. It never ceased to amaze me how they selected Fids and they got it right most of the time, or I think so. OK, I never stayed on a base, so I don't really know what went on, but on the ship it appeared that they were a fairly harmonious bunch, with exceptions.

[Part 1 0:33:25] Lee: And was there a sense of one community on the ship, or was it very much Fids and ship's crew? Was there a division?

Tolson: Structurally there was a division. The crew were on the lower deck, the Fids were on the middle deck and then the officers were in the top deck. Initially the Fids tended to keep to themselves a bit because they were new and green and didn't know the ropes. However the Fids were expected to work; it was part of their duty to work on board the ship so on the passage South they would be chipping and painting and generally helping out the crew. So that formed a bond very quickly between the crew and the Fids, and therefore there was a fair amount of weekend drinking and evening drinking going on.

[Part 1 0:34:14] Tolson: And I think really the bond was greater between Fids and crew than it was between officers and Fids. They would come up to the bridge, of course, because somebody was doing the Met, filling in the logbook. One of the Met guys who was going South, they would always do our Met work and on occasions they would come up for steering and watches at night. You always had a watchkeeper and once we got out of the higher density shipping, once we had cleared the English Channel, the Fids would start the evening watch. So that allowed the crew to be left free to do day work and paint the ship and those sorts of jobs. So there was that bonding between I would say the junior officers rather than senior officers because we

were on watch and we would chat with them, so slowly you got to know them. The greatest bonding, of course, was when you were doing cargo work because that was where everybody pitched in together. That was one of my ... The great time is just being involved, hands-on, getting dirty. I love that.

[Part 1 0:35:35] Lee: What did you make of the Antarctic when you got there, your first impressions as you sailed South from Stanley?

Tolson: It had to be apprehension. I think nobody could deny that they got apprehensive about the ice, the icebergs and to some extent what is expected of them? Because you are going into a really alien place and whilst I had every confidence in my ability to navigate and perform in a, shall we say, conventional type of shipping situation, this was very new. And I think I am one of these people that wants to perform well and is anxious that I do, and I think that anxiety perhaps sometimes got the better of me. Captain Woodfield and I, or perhaps I rather than Captain Woodfield, didn't really have a very good relationship, and that to some extent marred my first trip, unfortunately. Tom was a brilliant seaman; his navigation, his seamanship and just his wealth of experience ...

[Part 1 0:36:59] Tolson: By this time, 1973 / 74, he had done twenty years in the Antarctic but we didn't hit it off and I have refreshed my memory over recent years and months and weeks and it comes 'ping, ping, ping' in my diary quite frequently. We have talked about it too. I am a very good friend of Tom's now. Well I feel I am and while I see him quite regularly, speak to him, and it is something that has always hurt me a little bit, that we didn't get on because I was the one who had so much to gain. It didn't matter to him. He was leaving at the end of the trip. I was the new boy and I could have learned a lot about Antarctica. I could have certainly learned about seamanship and navigation had I taken the time to talk to him, but I didn't because I didn't like him then.

[Part 1 0:38:01] Lee: Was he too authoritarian for you? What was it about him that turned you away from him?

Tolson: I think he was authoritarian but not in a harsh sense. He had his way and I guess he'd had his way for an awful long time. And perhaps this was part of the problem, that BAS had formed very much around him. He had come up since the early Fifties and he had joined the *John Biscoe*, *Shackleton* he had been on, and he had overseen the *Bransfield* being built. He had virtually half designed the ship. It was his ship so it was very hard for anybody coming in, particularly if they uttered the wrong word. He would be down on top of them and that applied to everybody. I think I was probably just stupid enough to voice other people's opinions.

[Part 1 0:39:09] Lee: Woodfield, rather like Fuchs, was in from the beginning and had never been challenged. He had never been replaced and he hadn't replaced anybody else. So was it a case of him being 'the man' that was so difficult for junior officers to deal with?

Tolson: I think it must have been, to some extent, yes. As you say, he had been there very much in the days of Fuchs. He was a very confident man anyhow, Tom Woodfield. He perhaps didn't suffer fools gladly and I dare say that with the other

officers, the other senior officers who were in BAS, at least those who I saw, he was considerably more authoritarian. So there was that difference between his style and other senior officers, by that I mean captains primarily. So yes, he was the one who was leading BAS at sea, the way it was. He had enormous admiration from Fids, and from officers on the ships. One mustn't be one-sided about this. It was unfortunate that I developed this disliking of him at the time, and it was entirely my loss. I know that; I think I knew it at the time.

[Part 1 0:40:42] Lee: How much navigation did you get to do then, and how good, how reliable were the charts in the 1970s?

Tolson: You didn't know because you had nothing else to go by. No satellite navigation in the early '70s. It started to come along a bit later. However the charts were incredibly accurate in fact, when you think that they had been done fifty, even a hundred years earlier. And even BAS in the '50s and '60s were charting areas in great detail. Tom Woodfield, again, he was heavily involved in – they were using a system called Decca Hi-fix, and they and the Royal Navy were working very much together in charting detailed sections of: very often it was approaches to bases or channels, so they knew accurately the depths and the position of the land. It doesn't matter if the position of the land is out as long as everything is out with it. But navigation was confounded because if you have bits of ice – icebergs, fast ice – you yourself, with your naked eye, could sometimes have great difficulty picking out points of land or important points that you could take bearings from, which you would then use to fix your position.

[Part 1 0:42:27] Tolson: And the radar also could be confused because it was telling you you were a certain distance off the coast, when in fact actually it might be measuring it from an ice edge. So there were a lot of other factors. It meant you had to do an awful lot of cross-checking and work ahead, trying to identify landmarks, so that when you approached them, you actually knew that they were reliable points of land and you had the right ones and you could see them on the chart; you could see them where they really were. So a lot of thinking ahead and yes, that was even more worrying when you were starting to go into smaller bases. There was one base that terrified me. It was called Argentine Islands and I can remember actually, it was my first trip. It was my first time in there and all of these factors were there.

[Part 1 0:43:32] Tolson: There was ice everywhere. You couldn't really tell, looking at a point of land, what it was; you couldn't see it on the radar and you were trying to work in. And there was Tom Woodfield who was expecting positions on that chart all the time. So it was doubly nerve-racking. In later years I overcame that fear simply by looking at the chart long enough to remember every point on it. So it was in my brain. I could just visualise, but that first approach, that first time, yes it was frightening. And you have got to worry about the depth of water because depths down there can suddenly come up at you very very fast. So when we were approaching an anchorage by a base, there was always somebody on the echo sounder and it was his job just to read out the soundings as they came up or as they deepened again. And the captain was there on the control, the engine control, ready to stop her dead. And the officer on watch was just continually plotting these positions and trying to make sure at least if it wasn't on the track, you knew where the ship was all the time.

[Part 1 0:44:57] Lee: Were there any close calls, shall we say?

Tolson: In navigation I think we always had close calls. Thank goodness I personally haven't had a close call. Well I'm not aware that I have had a close call. But the poor old *Bransfield* had its bottom ripped out in later years because of a gyro, not knowing the gyro error of the compass. But I didn't have any close calls but there have been, obviously, over the years. It's always not quite knowing where you are, thinking that you are somewhere else, or going onto a rock that has suddenly come up, or the sounding has just come up and you've not had the time to stop.

[Part 1 0:46:07] Lee: Was there ever a moment where you just had to hope for the best, you were literally blindfold? Not literally but metaphorically blindfolded?

Tolson: Almost I think. What was going through a captain's mind, you can never be quite sure. I was never a captain so I never had that final gasp of fear or whatever it might be. But certainly, as a navigator, plotting a position when you are in close quarters, your stomach was always in your mouth, just wondering and just keeping on top of it.

[Part 1 0:46:58] Lee: But that is why you went, isn't it?

Tolson: Yes, exactly why I went, and that was the great thrill of it. Things changed in my next trip South. I was Second Mate. Captain Woodfield had gone at this point. He had gone to Trinity House as an Elder Brother and Stuart Lawrence was now captain. And things also within BAS were beginning to change and no longer was it one captain for the entire seven and a half month voyage. There were now two captains, so they split the voyage. Stuart Lawrence and John Cole were the two that I sailed with. They were different characters but they were both incredibly easy to get along with, providing you did your job. Stuart was absolutely brilliant. He just let you get on with it. And going back to this Argentine Island, this base that had scared the hell out of me the first time, and I had now got it fixed in my brain: going in there was just the most marvellous challenge because you could worm in very close.

[Part 1 0:48:20] Tolson: John Cole would even take it even further. John Cole was one of these devious captains that ... He liked to see you suffer, not nastily but he liked to really push you to your limits, and whether it was getting a ship into a spot, which was jolly convenient because it was only a few yard from the beach, or other things. He would play with personalities but, as I say, not in an unpleasant way. He was very heart-of-gold. But yes, I learned a lot from both of those captains. I suppose the thing you learned most about is the confidence of how far to push yourself and also knowing when to say something to him about 'I think you are getting a bit close.' John Cole tended to be ... he seemed to be quite a buccaneer. We would rush into a place and you would think 'Oh my god. Slow down. I can't keep up with you' as I am trying to plot my way along.

[Part 1 0:49:30] Tolson: But whether he really knew where he was, I don't know. Perhaps he was just entirely relying on us. But there was this great relationship, I found, and another captain when I was on the *John Biscoe* was Chris Elliott, and he likewise he just had total faith in you as a navigating officer, as a Second Mate. And I just used to love going in with the ships and always knowing where we were. You

always had some banter but they knew (which was the important thing) that you were confident about where you were, and it worked.

[Part 1 0:50:14] Lee: This decision to split the tour of duty into two, do you know where that came from?

Tolson: It was a very simple matter that you were going to run out of people prepared to do seven-month trips. I know that John Cole, who had been with BAS before, he left in the very early '70s because he had young children and he wanted to see something of his children, so he left. And Tom was going, and replacements were needed, and the only way that John Cole would come back was when he was told by Bill Sloman that they were now going to do half trips. 'Are you interested?' And he leapt at that. So the whole ethos of BAS was changing. It was senior officers initially, so it was Captains, Chief Engineers, Chief Officers. I am not sure about the Second Engineer, but it was at that level. Years later, of course, it became the entire crew but that wasn't at this point.

[Part 1 0:51:23] Lee: What was the relationship like between the *Bransfield* and the *Biscoe*, if any?

Tolson: Oh yes, there was, again in the '70s. I just remember it as being us and them, not that there was any real reason to not like them or to be disinterested in them, but I think most of the officers and probably all of the crew had only sailed in, or were sailing either in the *Biscoe* or in the *Bransfield*. So there was no cross-referencing. The only people who had definitely sailed in both were Tom Woodfield, Chris Elliott, and I think that was probably it in the '70s. The *Biscoe*, being a much smaller ship, tended to an awful lot of work round South Georgia and she did a lot of field party work.

[Part 1 0:52:20] Tolson: She did some scientific work but this is before the days of Offshore Biological Programme proper, but she did nevertheless do ... supported the biologists. But her role, because she couldn't carry as much cargo, was field party work. So I think we thought, in the *Bransfield*, that we were doing the hard work, and we kind of thought 'Oh, that little ship on the side. She just potters around.' What they thought about us I don't know. It's interesting: when I eventually went across to the *Biscoe*, as Chief Officer, I don't think I really wanted to go initially, because that was my feeling about the ship: 'that little thing'. But having got there, I did appreciate the ship. We actually did quite a lot of cargo work, quite interesting cargo work. I didn't really detect any animosity. A few people commented about the *Bransfield*, but it was nothing serious. I think it was all sort of a mystique, that we were better than them and they were better than us, but it wasn't founded on anything serious. It was a lack of knowledge.

[Part 1 0:53:38] Lee: But there was a gradual breaking down of these fiefdoms in BAS over those years?

Tolson: Yes, as officers and then crew started to do the half trips, there became an interchange. Now this happened after I ... I wasn't in BAS in the '80s so I am not entirely sure how it worked, but there was a swapping over of crew and officers, and that naturally helped smooth the way. The *Biscoe*, of course, went through an

enormous refit to convert her to the Offshore Biological Programme in the early '80s, and a number of officers from the *Bransfield* were working on her, so they saw ... Well they didn't see any problems; it was just another role and a very very busy role too.

[Part 1 0:54:35] Lee: But you had gone by that point?

Tolson: I left BAS initially in late '78.

[Part 1 0:54:42] Lee: But just go back to your years on *Biscoe*, then, and the servicing of South Georgia, those islands there, what kind of problems did that work present? It wasn't always as smooth as it might have been?

Tolson: No. The weather around South Georgia is affected by the prevailing westerly winds, so you could get some pretty robust wind hitting the western side of the island, where a lot of field parties – the small groups of scientists, they might have been geologists Primarily they were geologists, and they had to be put in by Gemini, by small boats with outboard engines. And they had to be taken off again, and they had to be resupplied. The eastern side of the island was a lot more protected from the weather because there were bigger bays and it was generally quieter. But yes, much of the work around the island was fairly fraught. You get calm days, obviously, and it was a pleasure to be out, but Bird Island could be a particularly unpleasant place, situated at the northern end of South Georgia, and there there was a permanent base of two to four people – they were mainly ornithologists, and the seas outside, the swells were just horrendous.

[Part 1 0:56:14] Tolson: Once you got the boats and the scow or the flubber (the flubber being a big inflatable pontoon that the stores could be towed in), once they were actually lowered into the water it wasn't quite so alarming, but getting the boat lowered into a heavy swell was again a rather terrifying thing because it's twanging on these wires that are running down the side of the ship. And then you have got to release it at the right moment, and there is all this thing about fingers getting trapped in blocks and all the other terrifying things that can go wrong. It just amazes me that there were seldom any accidents and, as far as I know, never serious accidents with fingers and boats and flubbers. But yes, there were unpleasant, very unpleasant moments.

[Part 1 0:57:13] Lee: There is quite a remarkable story of you having to actually load remnants of the Grytviken whaling industry onto *Biscoe*. I am anxious to know why anybody would want to do that.

Tolson: It's funny, isn't it, because it was much about the time that the Argentinians were preparing to invade the Falklands. In fact I think it was just before. The Falkland Island Government had asked the *Biscoe*, asked BAS if we could lift out some heavy equipment, anything really that they thought they might be able to make use of back in the Falklands. And we went in with the *Biscoe*. The whaling station at Grytviken, of course, had been progressively looted over the years by the fishing fleets: Polish and Russian and others.

[Part 1 0:58:12] Lee: So this was more looting?

Tolson: This was official looting, yes. Oh yes, we went in there to relieve it of lathes, steel plates, any equipment, and again it was a fun sort of time. We had a whole bunch of Fids who were employed strengthening up bridges so that we could drag two-ton loads across, and all we had was the winch on the ship. There was nothing else. There were no vehicles to drag it with, so we were running blocks and wires all over the place. Talk about Health & Safety; well we won't talk about Health & Safety, getting these things onto the ship, and we slowly filled it up and took all the swag back to the Falklands.

[Part 1 0:59:07] Lee: A steam engine?

Tolson: And a big steam winch, yes. I remember very well: there was a massive steam winch that, in the days of the whaling industry, they used that to haul the whales up onto the plan and then onto the upper plan where they were hacked to bits and put down into the boilers. Yes, I can remember this winch; we ripped the housing off it, the shed that it was in. We just cut it away and then unbolted it. And we had people from the Falkland Island Government saying 'We want that. Oh we will have that as well.' Lassoing it with a wire and dragging it down the beach.

[Part 1 0:59:49] Lee: So what was the motivation for this? Was it because the scrap metal was suddenly worth a lot of money or was it to stop other people nicking it or was there a more sinister political premonition?

Tolson: I think, or the story they told us was that they might have been able to make use of this equipment. Quite frankly I can't see why they would have wanted an old steam winch unless there is a museum there now. But they did take useful stuff and we went to another whaling station; we took steel plate out, which would have had a use in many areas. But lathes (I'm not sure of that), winches? I shouldn't think so but there was never any suggestion to us that it was to stop anybody else from getting it. But it could have been the case because it was all about this time. You think that we already knew that the Argentinians were on Southern Thule, on the trip before – when I was Second Mate with Stuart Lawrence on the *Bransfield*. We had just completed a very long run of hydrographics and geophysics, and we stuck our nose into this bay and saw people running around on the beach.

[Part 1 1:01:12] Lee: What was the island called?

Tolson: Southern Thule.

[Part 1 1:01:14] Lee: In the South Shetlands?

Tolson: South Shetlands¹.

[Part 1 1:01:17] Lee: What were these people doing?

Tolson: From a distance we couldn't see in detail but they were certainly on the beach and there was a small hut and there was smoke coming out from it so: we knew there

¹ Southern Thule is in the South Sandwich Islands, not the South Shetlands.

should not have been anybody there, and we knew they weren't Brits. So Captain Lawrence sent a coded message back to the Governor to inform him that there were people – I don't think he said which people - on this island. And when we got back to Stanley, he was invited up to Government House and thinking that he was going to be rewarded with a drink or something, and he was given a very severe bollocking for being there, and he should not have reported it. This was 1977.

[Part 1 1:02:10] Lee: What did he and you make of that, when you discussed it afterwards?

Tolson: We were non-plussed. He was pretty upset I think because ... We had wind that there might be people around. I think the Government knew but they didn't know what to do about it. This was the problem, and I think the *HMS Endurance* had been dispatched to look at things and they obviously knew more than they were letting on to us, or at least on to the captain. So we really blew their story open because it was now public and this wasn't what was needed.

[Part 1 1:02:57] Lee: So you were working on the assumption that these figures were (a) living on the island – the smoke was coming from the chimney – and they weren't British?

Tolson: That's exactly it, but we of course didn't know what was going on. There were always problems in the '70s with the Argentinians and if it wasn't that, then they were firing shots at the *Shackleton* which was doing geophysics work in the Scotia Sea, and trying to stop her from doing her work. So the tit-tat with the Argentinians was not new and just seeing these people on this island, we had to assume it was Argentinians.

[Part 1 1:03:42] Lee: Where were you in April '82?

Tolson: I was actually in Australia. I was in Sydney in April '82 and I did contact the embassy and asked if I should go back to the UK to volunteer to go South, but they told me to stay where I was.

[Part 1 1:04:02] Lee: When you heard the news, were you surprised at all or was it obvious, or did it just reaffirm your suspicions that something was brewing?

Tolson: I think I was not altogether surprised although I really didn't know any of the lead-ups because I had been in Australia for a few months. I just remember the people in the house where I was staying were completely non-plussed about where the Falkland Islands were, what it was, and why on Earth Britain was fighting about something ... They assumed it was something to the north of England or the north of Scotland, not something 8000 miles away from us, in the South Atlantic. So you were faced with this trying to explain to people in Aussie about this little island and its political associations with Britain. But no, I don't think I was greatly surprised. I was shocked because I still knew a few people from the Falkland Islands, from when I had been there in the '70s.

[Part 1 1:05:13] Lee: But as a Second Officer, were you ever made aware of the political presence – the importance of the British shipping in the Antarctic for political reasons?

Tolson: Not directly, I don't think, no. You knew that we were to some extent waving a flag. You certainly knew that *HMS Endurance* was waving the flag because the old *HMS Endurance* was very very fragile when it came to ice. You didn't go into ice in *HMS Endurance*, the old one, because she'd have probably been holed. But she was waving the flag and she had to hope that she wasn't going to have to wave it in dangerous waters. So we rather thought that they were the guys keeping an eye on things. When it happened, probably the BAS ships ended up doing a lot more than they bargained for, in terms of getting people out and making escapes.

[Part 1 1:06:16] Lee: You worked under Stuart Lawrence and Tom Woodfield – you talked about them – but you also worked with Chris Elliott as Captain. Tell me about his character.

Tolson: Chris, again, was one of these unflappable Masters and a delightful man to work with and a delightful personality. A man of many talents, he was a great yachtsman and he had also left BAS in earlier years. He had gone off and done other types of shipping. He was a very very hands-on seafarer and you learned a lot from him too because of his calm nature. I think perhaps he wasn't as totally, shall we say eloquent, as somebody like Tom Woodfield or Stuart. He was much quieter; perhaps not so self-assured in other things outside of his immediate sphere of driving the ship and looking after the safety of everybody and the cargo work. He was very focussed in that sense but not quite so aware of things, or at least so voluble about things outside of that. Unlike Stuart of course; we know Stuart is voluble all the time, and Tom Woodfield had his set methods and his protocol.

[Part 1 1:07:58] Lee: There's a story about positioning a buoy, Chris Elliott wanting a buoy installed for future use by FIDS shipping. Tell me the story.

Tolson: Yes. After we had done our official looting in South Georgia, Chris had determined that we ought to have a buoy place about a hundred metres off the jetty at the base, King Edward Point in Grytviken. That was essentially to prevent the ship, or any ship, from putting its full weight onto the jetty which was very fragile. And you could hold the ship off the jetty and use wires to this buoy. So after we had done our looting, we went ahead and looted some more stuff: a whole lot of chains and an enormously heavy weight and this very large buoy. And down the side of the *John Biscoe* we had draped ... and Chris was hands-on with doing this. He needed to know precisely because he was going to have to get the ship in position and we were going to have to cut the wires to get the chains out.

[Part 1 1:09:16] Tolson: So we had all this chain looped up, down the side of the ship, this enormous weight on a ramp that was greased on the foredeck of the *Biscoe*, and then this buoy that was on the deck ready to be lifted up. We set off to do this, and my goodness, we couldn't have ... We chose the right time but, typical of Antarctica, it decides to throw in a storm. So here we are, now committed in this very small bay, to laying out these three spiders webs of chain. As he ran the ship in at the correct angle, we would cut the wires and the chains would go down. And then we would reposition

the next one and then the third one had to be run from the beach, and then finally the weight was dropped from the deck straight down and the buoy was lifted off the deck and plonked there. And then to prove that it worked, we went and tied up and used it. But we did all of that in a gale and that, really, is Chris Elliott: unflappable.

[Part 1 1:10:28] Lee: Some of them took risks, then?

Tolson: I think he possibly did take risks but they were all calculated and you just have to take a certain element of risk at operations in Antarctica. If you did everything by the book, and you did it all on sunny days, you wouldn't get anything done and you wouldn't last as Master. So there is always this chance, an element of chance. If something goes wrong, if something goes wrong with the engines, if somebody doesn't do something right ... The engines: you have got to rely heavily on the engineers and we have always been lucky, I think, with engineers, good engineers, dedicated people. And the same with the deck guys but whether you are talking deck crew, they became moulded. They knew what they had to do. It didn't happen naturally, but there was always this older bunch that would teach the younger ones what was expected of them and how you did things and likewise with us on the bridge. So it ran reasonably smoothly or very smoothly.

[Part 1 1:11:47] Lee: Were you ever aware of any conflicts between what BAS in London was demanding, or Cambridge was demanding of the ship, and the Captain's decisions about what was safe to do and not to do?

Tolson: I don't believe that BAS Office would ever dictate what a ship should do, if a Master deemed it unsafe. Or if the Master deemed it unsafe, you would jolly well not do it. However there was one occasion that – and again Chris Elliott was Captain and I was Mate on the *Biscoe*, and we were down at Rothera, and Bill Sloman was on board and maybe Eric Salmon. But Bill Sloman had to get up to an inquest in the Falkland Islands and he had to be there. And we left Rothera and typically the weather came in again and he said 'You just can't slow down. I have got to get there.' And we were doubled up on watches so that there were two officers' pairs of eyes and two crew 24 hours a day, and we were just looking through the mank.

[Part 1 1:13:05] Tolson: There were icebergs everywhere. There were bergy bits and growlers which quite honestly they are the more dangerous. You can see an iceberg on the radar but you can't see a growler which is a great lump of ice that is just bobbing around, often below the water line as it drops in the swell. And we were just flying up at twelve knots all the way. That to me is my recollection the only time that a senior Office person has dictated. Chris could have said 'No' but we got there in one piece but it was a pretty hairy 36 hours.

[Part 1 1:13:49] Lee: So with the benefit of hindsight, perhaps if you had been Captain, you would not have gone?

Tolson: I think I would have done the same.

[Part 1 1:13:56] Lee: Oh really?

Tolson: I think so, probably, yes, maybe not as fast but I think done the same thing in principle: double up on watches.

[Part 1 1:14:04] Lee: Tell me the story about being shot at, in your kelp. What year was this?

Tolson: [Laughs] This was my first trip with BAS, 197- ... well it would have been '74 by now, just into the New Year.

[Part 1 1:14:20] Lee: Why would anybody want to shoot you?

Tolson: I think lots of people probably would like to shoot me, but these were particularly ferocious Chileans and we were in Punta Arenas. The ship had come up for one of its mid-trip bits of R & R, get some stores and let the boys go ashore for a few nights out. Eddie Dewhurst, my friend the Third Mate, myself and Larry Buchannan, Third Engineer, had decided that we wanted to go out in the Gemini boat, to do a bit of photography. There were some beautiful old steel wrecks just lying along the beach and we went off to take photographs of these and suddenly this bird scarer went off and all these birds flew up from the wrecks and we just looked around, thinking 'What a bloody silly place to have a bird scarer.'

[Part 1 1:15:24] Tolson: And it was, I don't know how long later, moments later, ... It couldn't have been minutes. But it was many seconds later we suddenly realised that this wasn't a bird scarer because we could see the water all around us, just exploding. And as we looked about, there on the beach were three guys lying in the sand and I can remember this so vividly, three men lying in the sand and a man with a blue flag. Every time he went like that [makes up and down flag waving action], they shot at us and all around us it was just flying up, and we just didn't know what to do. Well we knew what to do; we had to save ourselves but were we going to give up and hold up a white handkerchief or were we going to leg it out?

[Part 1 1:16:09] Tolson: The problem was: we were in this thick kelp and every time – and I was driving the wretched boat – every time I throttled up, it stalled because the kelp just got around the prop. So you were tilting up the engine and then getting this stuff off with a knife and then back in again. Every time you did it, it was just jamming up. And I remember sitting there in the boat, as I was doing this, and I just had this mental image of a bullet going through the centre of my head and blood just running down because that's exactly the target I would have made as I lifted up the engine. So anyhow we got the oars out and we just worked our way behind an enormous steel buoy and we regained our composure and decided that we wouldn't hold up a white flag but we would go out to sea, keeping this buoy in line with them on the beach. And then we realised the side of the boat had been hit because the entire starboard side of the boat was flat. So anyhow we took our chance and as we went off, we did manage to keep the buoy in line.

[Part 1 1:17:28] Tolson: But they were still shooting at us. And eventually got back to the ship where we looked a little bit silly, didn't we? because we arrived and there's Stuart Lawrence on the winch, lowers the hook down, lifts us up and 'Oh yes, boys. What have you been up to then?' 'Oh god, Stuart. I stupidly I sat on the side of the boat and my spike went through the boat.' 'Yeah, yeah!' I don't know ... It wasn't

then that he knew. We never told anybody about that for ages. We were deadily embarrassed. We were far more embarrassed than frightened; it's funny. I know that Larry, he spent that night on watch sitting in the engine room quaking. Well that's the story he gave us. But I was just plain embarrassed that we had put a hole in the boat.

[Part 1 1:18:20] Lee: But why were you being shot at?

Tolson: I think because the Chileans had had an attack that day on the Governor's palace and they probably thought that anybody who was lurking around a hundred yards off a beach with a camera was a fair target. The irony was that Captain Woodfield had organised a party on board the ship that evening before we sailed and he had invited the heads of all the military services along with other dignitaries and they all, one by one, cancelled. Of course we thought it was us but it wasn't until later that we realised quite why they had cancelled coming to the party – because the Governor's palace had been attacked. And I presume that that's why they went for us.

[Part 1 1:19:21] [End of Part One]

Part Two

[Part 2 0:00:06] Lee: Did you ever have occasion to go back to that spot?

Tolson: Yes. A year or two later I went back and we were sailing into Punta Arenas. By this time I was talking to people about our little mishap. And the pilot said to me 'This year they would have got you.' Because they'd had complete new weaponry and I guess it was because of the communist threat that they'd been exposed to. So that was one, and several years later I went back to make a film for Anglia Television about John Ridgeway and his daughter canoeing around Cape Horn. And because the Beagle Channel is a little bit secretive, or the Chileans wish it to remain so, they gave us an officer who actually was the equivalent of our SBS (Special Boat Service), and we had a warehouse that we were allowed to use.

[Part 2 0:01:17] Tolson: And all our gear was brought in and the boats were kept there while we were getting ready. And that warehouse, as I looked out, was right where these guys, all those years earlier, had been lying in the sand, and I told this to the young SBS officer and he just laughed. But he was always marching around with a big pistol which he ... When we eventually went off to do the filming trip, he escorted us to make sure we didn't go anywhere that we shouldn't, and he slept with this gun under his pillow.

[Part 2 0:01:57] Lee: If you had mentioned it when you got back to the ship, that the holes in your boat were bullet holes, would that have caused a major incident, or would it have been brushed under a carpet.

Tolson: Well I think possibly it would have been just pushed aside. I mean it would obviously have caused a bit of a stir there and then amongst the crew, and I dare say that's as far as it would have gone. Many years later, also, I was on a skiing trip in Switzerland and I was in ski school and one other English guy said so naturally we teamed up in the afternoon and went off skiing together and we were sitting on this chairlift in a blizzard, and he was just chatting away idly to me and eventually at some

point he said ‘Would you be prepared to work for me?’ I hadn’t got a clue what he did so I said ‘Well, I don’t know. I don’t know what you do.’ He said ‘We can make use of people like you.’ And I said ‘In what way?’ He said ‘Well you are a seafarer. You can go to places that other people can’t go and you are a very valuable commodity.’

[Part 2 0:03:24] Tolson: So I got the drift and I said ‘Well I am actually quite interested in that case but I think we need to pursue this further, don’t we?’ I was really just testing him out because I thought he was taking the mickey, and I wanted to see what really was going to develop. But he was, he was genuine Foreign Office and they were recruiting or they were touting, looking for people. And yes, it was a case of looking. But I guess I hadn’t got an Oxbridge degree so I wasn’t any use to them, but we remained friends for a number of years so I do know to that extent he was genuine. But he told me that had I been or any of us had been killed, that would have been it. They would have just put a top on it and nothing more would have been said. I guess that’s because of the nature of the politics between Britain and Chile at that time, and Marxists, and just showing sides. But that’s just one of the ... You don’t want that sort of thing to happen every day but it’s just one of the several BAS near misses that I have had in the line of duty.

[Part 2 0:04:48] Lee: There are a couple more anecdotes about your first period in the Antarctic and perhaps we could start off talking about the ice cliff collapse at Halley, because in fact you unwittingly saved the lives of several men.

Tolson: Possibly I did. I was a junior officer working with the crew on deck. Unloading the ship at Halley is always fraught with problems and I really take my hat off to any Master who has to bring a ship alongside there. Sometimes you get nice flat ice which is basically sea ice level and you can work on that. Other times you have got medium height ice cliffs and sometimes it is way up above the ship which is what it was on this occasion. And we were alongside, bad weather; we weren’t actually able to do anything at the time except I had the guys on deck doing jobs.

[Part 2 0:05:55] Lee: You couldn’t actually unload at that point?

Tolson: No, we weren’t unloading. It was a particularly bad season in terms of distance from Halley base and there was this great backlog of vehicles trying to get to Halley. We were over 35 miles from Halley so we had got Sno-cats, Muskegs, bulldozers even, pulling sledges. Bulldozers go about 2 miles an hour if you are lucky – laden with drums of kerosene and timber and food. So they would all go off and eventually they would come back, you would hope in a sort of a circle, but they seemed to get stacked up and anybody was driving. We even had ships’ officers driving these vehicles. But anyhow I was working on deck with the crew and I just fortuitously said ‘Well let’s go in for a cup of tea.’

[Part 2 0:06:58] Tolson: And we hadn’t been in very long when the cliff collapsed on the ship and smashed in parts of the bulwarks down the port side of the ship and pushed in some of the accommodation, and obviously broke pipework and things. And the ship just lurched enormously, the lines parted, broke and the ship just drifted out into the bay. Other people seeing the same thing from their own perspectives. The engineers, the moment it happened, and the ship’s movement, the Chief Engineer sounds the alarm and the engineers were rushing down to the engine room to do what,

they didn't know, but obviously it was ultimately to get the engines started so that the captain could have some control. He was in his cabin I think, at the time. So he rushes up to the bridge and does what he can.

[Part 2 0:07:56] Tolson: And I think, on that occasion, ... Incredibly, because we didn't have any vehicles on the ice edge, none of them went into the sea. It could have been an altogether completely different story. We could have had people working on the ice cliffs; you could have had vehicles there; and then: who knows what? Not only people being crushed on deck, but people being lost from the ice. What I can never ever get over is how lucky we have been in BAS. Pure luck on so many occasions when things have gone wrong but they have gone wrong at the right time. And that was definitely an occasion.

[Part 2 0:08:38] Lee: Was it tea time? Is that why they went in, because it was tea time?

Tolson: I love my cup of tea and I guess it was. It was mid-afternoon and I think I was damn cold. We were all cold and we were doing pretty mundane things. In a sense you were doing things to keep them occupied. I think that was probably what we were about because at Halley, again, you get long hours of tedium if nothing is going on and it is better to keep them doing something. It wasn't completely useless work but we had them out there doing jobs and yes, it was the middle of the afternoon.

[Part 2 0:09:18] Lee: Have you ever wondered about a Higher Power keeping watch over Fids?

Tolson: I believe there is a Higher Power in some form, watching over all of us, because it's not just BAS where I have been lucky and Fids have been lucky. I am not sure that I believe in Jesus Christ but I certainly believe in something perhaps approaching what the Stone Age and the Iron Age people thought: some very powerful being but they didn't worship a god as such – call them pagans or what you like. But yes, there is Something out there, looking after ...

[Part 2 0:10:00] Lee: A fair number of Fids have talked about feeling close to a Creator or a Supreme Being whilst in the Antarctic, in one way or another. Has that ever happened to you?

Tolson: The only time that that sort of powerful feeling has existed, was not when I was in BAS. It was actually when I was filming Robert Swan's expedition *In the Footsteps of Scott* and that was because Captain Scott's hut was 200 yards along the beach from ours. And he was undoubtedly our supreme being. It was a person; you knew he existed; you knew all about him. I suppose it was because we were doing *In the Footsteps of Scott*, and we were living every day, going into his hut, and for me going into his hut to film it was actually quite a terrifying time. I insisted to myself that I filmed it in the dark, or in the gloom. I didn't want to just do it in broad daylight.

[Part 2 0:11:14] Tolson: It meant setting up lights inside which meant running a cable from our hut, 200 yards along the beach and into his hut. And I didn't want to be seen as a wimp by the others: 'Come and help me get the lights set up.' I'd rather do it

myself but I remember going into the hut holding two stands of lights and kicking the door open and walking in. And I had this sense that there was somebody behind the door that was sort of drawing me in. But that's the only Antarctic presence that I've really felt. But we all felt that – all five of us on that expedition. Scott was the all-powerful.

[Part 2 0:12:02] Lee: We may come back to that shortly but the other incident when perhaps you might have been grateful for some help was an occasion when you were in a Zodiac and you were caught up in a ship's rope in some way.

Tolson: Yes, I remember that occasion very well. It was one of these fortunately very rare occasions when the captain's eye wasn't on the ball. We had been tasked with putting an American scientist – he had a satellite navigation unit that he wanted to put on an island to monitor something. And we had to get him onto the island, and the ship stopped. It made a lee for us and we were lowered down. But nobody, including the captain on the bridge, and even worse the people on deck, were watching. So when we sent down, and the painter which was spanned from the bow of the boat up to the main deck ... We should have been dropped, engine going, released from the crane hook, and when we were happy, painter thrown in. There was nobody there watching us, so the captain didn't see what was going on; they were not on deck. The ship now assumed that we were gone and the captain turned the ship into the sea and there was a force 5/6 running.

[Part 2 0:13:42] Tolson: So all of a sudden we were going up and down on this enormous sea and the boat ... The American was in the boat crying – I mean he was literally crying with fear. And just a few yards away was the propeller and as the ship pitched, the propeller came out of the water and it was thrashing away. And I knew that eventually, if we didn't get out of this situation, we were going to be going in through that propeller. And I was shouting; I had the radio, calling on the radio: nothing. So I was forced in the end to just make a leap for the ladder which hung down the side of the ship, and just hope to god I caught it. And I did anyhow. I managed to crawl up, ran up to the bridge and got the captain to (a) stop the engines and (b) swing her round again to give us a lee. And I think it was the only time I have ever sworn at a captain in my life. Yes, it was pretty unpleasant, but those sorts of things don't happen in BAS very often. Quite amazing. It's the alertness of people and I don't know how two lots got it completely wrong, but it was a nasty nasty moment.

[Part 2 0:15:10] Lee: Why did you ... ? You left in '78, for a better opportunity or was five years enough?

Tolson: No I left in '78 actually to go and do my Master's ticket, so it was convenient with coming back on the *Biscoe*, we arrived back in England at the very end of ... It was early December '78 and I was starting Master's in January in Southampton, so it was an absolutely perfect time to stop. I didn't go back with BAS after that because I rather wanted to try something else, in the Arctic. Filming at this time hadn't really become a job opportunity or a job option but I still wanted to explore the other regions North. But I made a tactical mistake and I realise that now. I went up to Canada House and I actually asked them for a work permit and they told me (remember this is 1979 – the height of exploration in the Canadian Arctic) they told me didn't need merchant seamen, which, having worked now in Canada in recent years a lot, I know

that was absolute rubbish. But that's what I was told and I was stupid enough to just think 'Well they are the power that be. They don't want me so that's it.'

[Part 2 0:16:46] Tolson: I never thought of doing it the way you would do it now. You apply to a company and the company gets you a permit. So I didn't go back and actually it was shortly after that I started to ... I was working with a marine conservationist here in Oxford and I was doing quite a lot of work with him – a delightful old American who had been brought up in the war, the Second World War, in America. He was a conscientious objector so he refused to build warships but he built merchant ships. And here we were in Oxford in the early '80s, making steel hulls for the old wooden college barges, to fit absolutely precisely. And we were doing this on the river bank and we were using hammers and wedges and blocks & tackle to construct these things, these basically coffer dams for boats that were about ninety feet long, and then submerging them, floating the barges across on top, lifting them.

[Part 2 0:17:59] Tolson: And they are still there today, preserved. So that was a wonderful experience and then I went to Australia where I did start to touch on filming and film research, and it was after that that I got more seriously interested in filming. It got to a point around about '83 where I really had to start to make a decision. 'Am I going to try and go into filming?' And here I am at the grand old age of thirty four or something like that, fortunately not with a wife and children. So money wasn't quite the problem. But trying to get into filming or do I go back to sea? And really I didn't want to go back to sea.

[Part 2 0:18:44] Lee: But you went back to the Antarctic as a cameraman in fact?

Tolson: Yes, that was the luck. I was at this point when I had to make this decision. I am either going to try and get into filming and stop playing around with it in an amateur sense, or I am going to have to go back to sea and do something else. And I did something I hate doing. I contacted an old friend who I had been at school with and he was a very very successful animation man, artist. I went up to see him. I knew he couldn't offer me a job but I thought 'Well I will ask the question.' And he said 'Oh yes, if I see something I will let you know.' And, lo and behold, two days later in the post there was this little cutting for an Antarctic expedition. And just as Shackleton had put in his adverts all those years ago, 1907, 'hardship guaranteed, no pay'.

[Part 2 0:19:49] Tolson: And so I wrote off and I was dashing off on a skiing holiday the next day, posted the letter, didn't think an awful lot more about it. And when I got home, I was told that I'd had a phone call from Robert Swan. He'd very much like to meet up with me. So I went up to London to meet Robert Swan and he met me at Victoria Coach Station – a strapping bloke, and we had a day in his office and then at the end of the day he took me, with another of his team members, to look at a boat that they were thinking of buying for their Antarctic trip to recreate Scott's walk to the South Pole. And I still could barely believe it. We looked at this boat, a small fishing boat. It was a complete wreck but to actually get the engine started you had to ignite it with some form of explosive, to actually get it to turn.

[Part 2 0:20:58] Tolson: I remember thinking 'God, if this is the sort of level that we are going in at, I don't want anything to do with it. And as I got out of the car at

Victoria to go home, I said to Rob Swan 'I think I could work with you but you are full of bullshit.' I didn't really know what I was saying. It was a bloody cheek to say that but anyhow I did come to work with him and that was a wonderful experience working down in Antarctica, doing the film of that expedition. Five men in a hut 24 feet by 16 feet; two of them were going to walk to the South Pole. You have got a complete nucleus of rank amateurs but very enthusiastic, who were all working with him. The guy in charge of the ship was an ex- Royal Naval helicopter pilot and he was just a dynamo of making things happen. Anyhow we got to the Antarctic and put our hut up and had a year of hell.

[Part 2 0:22:25] Lee: Well I am aware that there were divisions amongst the ranks, shall we say, and I just wonder whether Mr Swan was indeed full of what you thought he might have been full of?

Tolson: He was. I mean to pull something off like that, you need to have charisma and he had loads of it and that can be translated as bullshit if you like. But you also need to have technical knowledge which he didn't have and he was the first person to admit that. So his technical expert was Roger Mear, both of whom were ex-BAS personnel: GAs (General Assistants). Roger was a real GA: he climbed mountains; he could save lives if people went down a crevasse. And then of course there was Mike Stroud who also had been in BAS. So four of us were all BAS and then the fifth member, Gareth Wood, was a Canadian. But Robert was the powerhouse. He would go out, pull the crowds, pull the sponsors, get the money, and that was his great forte. But yes, bullshit, lots of it, but determination and sheer strength, bravado. He had enormous qualities.

[Part 2 0:23:48] Tolson: If you are a year in a hut with four other people, and there are frictions, it is jolly difficult to get rid of them because in a sense, you have got nowhere to go. Roger and Robert, unfortunately, were poles apart from one another. Apart from the fact that they wanted to get to the South Pole, Roger particularly didn't admire Robert's methods and Robert knew that he had to have Roger, so he had to keep on a par. But there were times during that trip when Roger, you could sense would have, if he could have done, got on an aeroplane and gone home. And living in that hut with the two of them, at any one time, as the months went on, became more and more intolerable. And they actually did tend to go off ... One of them would go off for a bit. There was a shed down the beach and Robert would go and sit in that and type up his sponsorship thank you letters for many many days.

[Part 2 0:24:57] Tolson: Or else he would go off or Roger would go off to the American base at McMurdo which was twenty miles away. Later on in the season of course there were trips being done. Roger was off on all of those: climbing Mount Erebus, the re-enactment of the Cape Crozier walk (the mid-winter journey). So there were quite a lot of occasions when there were not the two of them in the hut together, and whenever that occurred, the four or us or the three of us, or the two of us, or whoever it was, would get on perfectly amicably. It was just tragic that those two characters couldn't work together.

[Part 2 0:25:37] Lee: This dis-harmony seemed to have come to a major head with the expedition to climb Mount Erebus. Is that right?

Tolson: Mount Erebus ... Early on, Roger of course, he wanted to get out and do things. We were only three or four weeks into the trip. The ship had gone and we had spent all of that time getting our hut in order. It was just a shell that was thrown up and then we made it habitable. Roger wanted to go off, as I am sure Gareth and Mike did. I don't know at that time what Robert thought. I was fairly concerned because of the five of us, I was really the only one who hadn't got any mountain craft experience. Yes, I had been skiing in the Alps but that's tame. There you are looking at a damn great mountain, 13000 feet, eleven miles away and the air is so clear, it's as big as daylight. You feel you can touch the damn thing. And I had never worn skins on my skis before, so skiing up hills seemed completely impossible, and a rucksack – I had never worn a rucksack on skis. And I thought I had better take my camera, my very small camera, to try it out and maybe get some footage of an early escape.

[Part 2 0:27:04] Tolson: But we didn't get very far and to an extent I was the problem because I was cumbersome. I was uneasy and I think at about 6000 feet, I was beginning to show signs of weakness. Robert was certainly beginning to show signs of weakness and at round about 9000 or 10000 feet, Roger decided to pull the plug on it. We weren't going to get to the top, so we were all willing to come down. It was like an army in complete disarray. We just seemed to go off in any direction downhill. I was trying to ski on blue ice on a glacier, with a rucksack on, and I was going all over the place. And you could see ahead of you crevasses, open crevasses and I: 'Am I going to go down this thing?' The only way to stop was to fall over and try to work yourself to the side of it and carry on.

[Part 2 0:28:04] Tolson: We all got down, back to the hut at various times of the late afternoon, and it was not until the end of the trip, when I was talking quietly with Roger, and he apologised to me and said 'I am really sorry John I did that to you on Erebus, but I had to prove to Robert that he didn't know what he was doing.' And that was it. He had to prove to Robert that technically Roger was in control, and it was a pretty harsh way of doing it for both of us because I was frightened after that to go out with Roger because I really didn't trust him because I didn't understand then what his motives were all about. So I didn't do the mid-winter journey to Cape Crozier.

[Part 2 0:28:56] Tolson: I agonised over that for days: 'Do I go? Don't I go?' Because it is a pretty tough one. You are travelling in minus fifties all the time in total darkness and if conditions had been like what Cherry Garrard had on Scott's expedition in 1911, then very very seriously potentially damaging. So in the end I decided not to do it and I spent that time in the hut with Robert. We actually had quite a lot of work to do. There was an unending amount of sponsorship stuff and also philatelic stuff that had to be done at some point. So we just did that. But it was also a time of sitting with Robert, talking, talking about his life, talking about – perhaps – his future, listening to him and chatting, but mainly listening.

[Part 2 0:29:58] Lee: How was your footage in the end?

Tolson: My footage? I think that was a year of terror, wondering whether there was any footage. I was fortunate enough, before the ship sailed, to get a little bit of footage onto the ship which they took back and it was sent to a laboratory in the UK, and from that I gleaned that everything was OK. I got a two-line telex from our office: 'All good. Keep going,' So I knew at least that the cameras were OK because I had four

cameras and I made sure that I did a bit from each of them, so there wasn't any nastiness like gates ripping the film – all the things that could happen in the cold. Anyhow it was still eleven months of sitting on this stuff, in our porch. Every time the roll was finished I would wrap it up, put it in our porch, which at times would have been –30 for sure (the ambient temperature was –50s) and at the end of it all, taking it home.

[Part 2 0:31:10] Tolson: Going up to the laboratory the following day – it had been processed overnight – I went in the following morning and I met the lab manager and I said 'Is it even worth me coming in?' He said 'Yes, it's not bad.' And we went through it all and I think there was about two minutes of film that was scratched, and the rest of it was all OK. Incredible luck really. It was luck but also it was a lot of pathetic dedication on my part because I think if there had been somebody watching over me all that time, all they would have seen was me polishing lenses and cleaning the gate of the camera, because in a film camera, the shutter is going up and down and you get dirt, dust, hairs, anything like that: it gets trapped and just lodges there. And your film is ruined because you just see this hair, this thing just dancing around on the screen and your footage is useless, and I don't think I had any of that. But it was all down to the fear that that would happen, so I did; I was religious about that.

[Part 2 0:32:32] Lee: There were a number of filming expeditions but as we are talking about the Antarctic, let's just focus on the other big Antarctic project which was in 1993 when you ended up joining the crew for *Life in the Freezer*.

Tolson: Yes, I was very lucky to get in on that one because *Life in the Freezer* was all about BBC Natural History and I never have been, never will be a Natural History cameraman. But they did want somebody who could get some aerial footage and other things. Nothing specific but other events. And I was sent down via Brize Norton, got on the new *HMS Endurance* which was a wonderful, lovely ship. She was Norwegian built. The Royal Navy: that year they had chartered her. It was the first season that they'd had her. Tom Woodfield actually had been fairly instrumental in obtaining the *Polar Circle* for the Royal Navy. It was very much a trial run.

[Part 2 0:33:46] Tolson: And anyhow I went down to Rothera, but before we went to Rothera, we went further South and it enabled me to do a little bit of filming from their helicopters. It also enabled me to, on one afternoon, sitting in their launch, watching *HMS Endurance* go aground, or at least hitting a rock, which was actually ironic. It was a rock that we had found some years earlier when I was on the *Bransfield*. But anyhow, when we got back on board, in the strict Royal Naval tradition, the captain was virtually packing his suitcase because if you go aground, that's court martial. And I think probably under normal circumstances it might well have been, but you were in the Antarctic so there was a little bit of leeway. But, yes, he was pretty worried about that, as was the Jimmy (the First Lieutenant).

[Part 2 0:34:42] Tolson: But the ship was bobbing around on this rock for a bit before it fell off. We then went back to Rothera where I spent about two months, and would get not every occasion in the aircraft because there was a bit of a rotational factor about it. Other people wanted to go flying, but I did get up quite a lot. And the weather wasn't particularly good for a long time but towards the end, and ironically that was also towards the end of the season when you would have expected it to be

getting worse, we did get some nice weather on occasions and I would go up. Very compliant pilots and take me for spins and get some beautiful aerial shots. I was also making my own home movie, *Return to the Islands*, and it enabled me to get some even more stunning stuff. But those BAS pilots really know how to throw those planes around, the Twin Otters.

[Part 2 0:35:49] Lee: First of all, did you do any flying yourself?

Tolson: I did do a little bit of flying to the extent that the pilots will let you, or they will encourage you, almost make you fly the aeroplane if the weather conditions are right, on a more or less straight and normal. And they would doze off or at least pretend to, and you were left flying. I had one particular pilot who was an ex RAF Search and Rescue pilot, a helicopter pilot, and I was flying the Twin Otter back with him, and he said 'OK bring it on a final approach.' Now this is the new Rothera runway where the Canadians have built the runway for BAS. They have blown a mountain up and made this fantastic runway.

[Part 2 0:36:46] Tolson: So you really do, you get this very long, as long as you want, run in, and we were coming in on this long final approach, and I was there chatting away and he was just being very nonchalant. And eventually I said to him 'Are you going to take over?' And he said 'No,' And we carried on and then I felt the plane beginning to shake and it was getting some cross winds and we were tracking sideways. I said 'Greg, I think you had better take over now.' He said 'OK' and we landed it. I wouldn't have had a clue how to land a twin engine. I had a private pilot's licence but I am not sure whether he knew I had a private pilot's licence. I can't remember now whether I had talked about it or not but he was quite happy to let me bring that plane in, and goodness knows ... And I said to him afterwards 'Would you have let me land it?' And he said 'Yes, probably, but that cross wind was a bit of a problem.' Yes, unbelievable.

[Part 2 0:37:49] Lee: This was Greg ...?

Tolson: I can't remember his surname and perhaps it is better I can't, but 'Greg' is a bit of a giveaway.

[Part 2 0:37:47] Lee: And again, another filming trip, again with Robert Swan, in '94 and '95, which wasn't entirely successfully completed.

Tolson: Yes, another hitting of rocks, that one, wasn't it? That was a real tragedy. Robert Swan, in '89, had taken students to the North Pole; well not to the North Pole but up into the high Arctic, and then go on to make an international assault on the North Pole. And from that one, he came up with the idea of taking students on a slightly bigger scale, to the Antarctic. And we chartered a Russian ... had been a scientific, probably spy ship in its day. And we had about 35 students from about 17 to about 24 years old, from something like twenty different countries. They were all in Ushuaia and the ship was coming up from the Antarctic, and while the kids were doing their time in Ushuaia, they were learning, they were being taught team building by a group of experts. And the ship, with another expedition of people who were bird watchers, ornithologists, they were coming up and they ploughed full speed over a reef, and the ship got back to Punta Arenas where ... the double bottom had saved it.

[Part 2 0:39:40] Lee: The ship got back to Punta Arenas.

Tolson: The ship limped, probably limped, into Punta Arenas and I was asked by Rob Swan to fly over from Ushuaia to Punta Arenas and just try and find out what was going on. The expedition who were operating it was not too keen that I was around but anyhow I established, through talking with the Lloyds surveyor, that there were 15 holes in the bottom of the ship and that we would put cement boxes over each of them. Now a cement box is a fairly standard temporary repair that you can do on structures and a ship's hull is a structure so that's what we did, and he was quite happy about that. But it was only a temporary repair valid for three months, so it was legal and it was certificated as such. And that lost us four days.

[Part 2 0:40:44] Tolson: So now the ship came round to pick them up from Ushuaia and took them down into the Antarctic where they experienced a lot of team building, as you might imagine. Putting tents up in the howling blizzards, abseiling down small mountains, learning about polar science and learning about media, which really I think was one of the reasons I was there. I was involved in the media team. But when you have got kids from Soweto; they have never seen the cold. They have certainly never seen the snow. They had never even seen the sea. So you are bringing youngsters from completely different backgrounds and putting them in this environment. And I think it is an awfully expensive way of getting people to experience things but I am sure it was very valuable. And Rob Swan, at this point, was the United Nations Ambassador for young people, so it was a big kudos thing and it was at the start, really, of Rob Swan involving people in the saving of Antarctica, which is ongoing today in his life.

[Part 2 0:42:08] Lee: You re-joined BAS for a couple of seasons, '93/4, and I wonder what about BAS had not changed in the intervening fifteen years.

Tolson: Well I suppose if BAS hadn't changed, I would have possibly have carried on enjoying the old company, but BAS certainly had changed. I joined the *James Clark Ross* and immediately everything about it, from the IT, the communications, just the bearing of the officers and the crew – they were much more (dare I say it?) professional. That doesn't mean to say they were better. I don't think they were better for a moment. In fact I would go the other way, but there was a cosy company professionalism.

[Part 2 0:43:08] Tolson: Something else I noticed later on was that a lot of people didn't like getting wet and cold. But seriously, the IT/communication was so much more advanced, as was Health & Safety. That had gone on leaps and bounds and I am not a fan of Health & Safety particularly. I mean it is a necessary evil I know, but all of these factors did not endear me to modern BAS. What it is trying to achieve is brilliant, but I can remember: we'd just had Christmas Day and I walked out of the Officers and Fids dining room. By this time we were combined. This was another change in things, not that I disapproved of this, but before, when you were on the three tiers of *Bransfield* ... Now the Fids and the Officers were all lumped into one and that was fine. I walked out onto deck and we were heading up, I think we were heading up towards Stanley; we were still in the Antarctic. It was hot sunshine, flat calm and I thought 'God, this isn't Antarctica.' I wouldn't say that there and then,

because that's a nonsense, to pretend that there and then I didn't want to go back, but it was just another of those nails in the coffin, that I didn't really like it any more. And I knew as a senior officer ... I had only gone back as a Third Mate, as much as anything to go and have another look at the Antarctic and to think about whether to stay. Had I stayed, I think, Stuart Lawrence had implied that there would be a fairly rapid promotion again but I just couldn't really face it. I couldn't stand the thought of what I had just seen in those few months.

[Part 2 0:45:14] Lee: So the whole ethos of life on board the ship had changed, had it?

Tolson: Yes. It had all become much more efficient. One has got to remember, I think, that there was enormous pressure now within BAS, within science, to perform. The scientists had cruise time. The *James Clark Ross* is a phenomenal scientific platform, very very efficient, and you have got a lot of people wanting – scientists, not just from BAS either – wanting ship's time, so you have got to make every minute count. You might be doing marine biology for a couple of weeks, and then you are back into Stanley, you are getting them off and you are getting geophysicists on board and you are off again.

[Part 2 0:46:04] Lee: Were the scientists in charge?

Tolson: The captain is always in charge but there is a Lead Scientist who communicates very closely with the captain so he is discussing on a day-to-day basis what they want. The project is dealt with weeks and weeks in advance and particularly with geophysics, say, when you know where they want to go so the Navigating Officer has to be involved in doing a lot of plotting as well. So the scientists and the senior officers have worked closely for a period of time before but then on a day-to-day basis you are working together.

[Part 2 0:46:47] Lee: So again, was there any hint of conflict there: the scientists wanting to do certain things which would compromise the captain's thinking about the safety of the boat? Did that ever crop up, that kind of thing?

Tolson: I think it potentially does do, yes. Some of your Lead Scientists are fairly pushy. That's probably why they got to that position, and they try and exert their authority on the captain. Now if the captain were not strong-willed enough ... I don't know what the demarcation is within BAS, if a scientist felt that a Master had not given them the time or had perhaps been seen to be cautious, what repercussions there may have been. But the Master is the master and he is in charge and I don't think any self-respecting senior scientist will try and influence, if there is any element of danger.

[Part 2 0:47:48] Lee: So had the fun gone out of it all?

Tolson: I think the fun had gone out of it for me, but also I had left it in end of '78 and I was coming back fourteen years later. It was not a surprise because there was an enormous amount of water under the bridge of BAS, but an enormous amount of water under my own bridge. I had done an awful lot of other things; to come back into something that I remembered with affection, enormous affection, in the seventies, I just didn't see it in this modern-day BAS, which is an entirely personal view because I

think modern-day BAS is brilliant but it is not for me. In 2011 I could not go back and work in BAS. Well I'm a bit past it now aren't I? But I would still probably love to drive the Geminis about and navigate the ship but the whole living the BAS scene? No I don't think so.

[Part 2 0:48:52] Lee: But BAS ... You must perhaps have to recognise that BAS simply had to modernise. You couldn't run a 1970s organisation in the year 1995 or 2010.

Tolson: No, you couldn't. Absolutely right. So what's changed? I just haven't grown up. BAS has had to evolve. After the Falklands War, BAS was instructed – I don't know it that is quite the right word – but they had to enlarge. I think that was more or less directions from Mrs Thatcher. They had to enlarge their airstrip; they had to get a new ship. So it's progress. It is progress. You could not leave BAS ... BAS could not do the science with 1970s ships that it does today, and therefore BAS would not be a credible organisation. It is still a world leader. And yes, they must be very worried with these financial cuts they have had to experience in the last probably couple of years, but they still manage to do incredible science, and that's fantastic.

[Part 2 0:50:07] Lee: So when you went back in '93, you did not have a deadline to leave, but you chose to leave after a couple of years because it just wasn't the same?

Tolson: Yes, basically. I decided that after two trips, I really didn't want to stay any longer. I just couldn't see the point and by good fortune, I was home on leave and the phone went. Actually I didn't take the call; my wife did. And it was an old friend of mine, asking me to go and work for him. I really wasn't very interested because he was in the oil business and I knew nothing about oil, and so why? Why bother? He pestered me for a week and finally I said 'OK. You had better show me something.' So he sent me off with one of his surveyors to a job they were doing in Malta and I had a week out there; I wouldn't say a holiday but all paid for and anyhow that was a convenient turning point and that was in 1995-ish and I have been doing that more or less ever since.

[Part 2 0:51:32] Lee: We have talked a lot about being scared in the Antarctic but I think there were some occasions that made you laugh as well? I am thinking of a chap called Hughie Monckton. Tell me about him.

Tolson: Hughie. Hughie is another of these fantastic characters, not larger than life but he had an enormously appealing character but unfortunately he was bloody awful at timekeeping. He couldn't get out of bed at midnight when he was due to go on watch. It didn't affect me directly but I do remember this very clearly. The Chief Officer, Barry Bromby, he was a bit of a lad, he decided that Hughie had to be taught the hard way. And somehow – the way Hughie slept it probably wasn't very difficult – they got a deflated Gemini boat into his cabin and blew it up. So when his alarm went off, and he didn't stir, naturally, because he never did and the phone rang a few time and he stumbled around in the dark, he was completely pinned to his bed by this Gemini boat. And he was never late after that.

[Part 2 0:52:46] Lee: So you inflated the boat ...?

Tolson: In his cabin. A 16-foot boat was inflated. How he didn't wake up with the hiss of the air, I don't know but that was a very funny moment. You get periods of humour but one spontaneous moment, they don't happen all the time. And there was another one when I was in the hut at Robert Swan's expedition. We were all sitting around the table which was an 8 x 4 sheet of plywood, chatting to one another. It was fairly early on and we were reasonably friendly still, and suddenly, there was this enormous explosion. We really did look around in shock because we had nothing explosive, other than the petrol outside and that was about it. We had no guns. And Roger got up and he walked to the little area that we had for all our tins of food and things, and the room was pink, and dripping down from it was strawberry jam. This, I think it must have been about a 25 lb tin of strawberry jam had actually exploded and painted the room pink. That was just a moment of madness. After that we were in hysterics. But again, on that expedition there were lots of funny moments but not quite as fast as that.

[Part 2 0:54:22] Lee: Sorry, that story to do with Hughie was to do with the so-called Glenmorangie, malt whisky.

Tolson: [Laughs]. Yes, Hughie liked it. I don't know if he will ever forgive me for that. Hughie Monckton was a lover of whisky, Glenmorangie, and he brought his own supply in in Southampton before we sailed. He didn't readily give it out to anyone. He wasn't tight; he just had only a few bottles, so it was for special occasions and down South, often the ship would be at anchor at night and you could relax a little bit. We had the Director, Dr Laws, on board at the time and Hughie had said to me that he was going to give the Director a slurp of his Glenmorangie. All the senior personnel would eat in the wardroom with us. On the *Bransfield* it was still officers only and they would be up there. So I thought 'What can I do to get Hughie going?' So I found an empty bottle of Glenmorangie and doctored it up with some cold tea.

[Part 2 0:55:46] Tolson: And Hughie passed his bottle of Glenmorangie around to the Director, gave him a drink, and I just remember seeing the Director – it was like projectile vomit. This Glenmorangie: unfortunately the bottles had been switched in the process, was cold tea. The Director was the recipient of it. I don't know what he thought of it, but it was a funny moment.

[Part 2 0:56:15] Lee: One of the characters you seemed to come across was Bob Headland. There are a couple of stories about him I think.

Tolson: Bob, yes. Bob is one of those great, a serious larger-than-life personality. He'd been in BAS for a number of years and he was with Scott Polar. I knew Bob vaguely in BAS but I didn't know him very well. But I went off to the Arctic to do a film of a crossing, the first time a ship had ever crossed the Arctic Ocean from Murmansk over the North Pole, through the Bering Straits to a Russian port called Provideniya. And it was after the Berlin Wall had come down. The Russians were freeing up their very sophisticated nuclear ice-breakers, and Western tourists were going on board and paying vast amounts of money: \$25000 to \$30000 a head. I was on board filming for the BBC and Bob Headland was on board as a guest lecturer and there were a number of others: Wally Herbert, a famous dog-sledging man and also ex-BAS dog-man; he was on board too.

[Part 2 0:57:32] Tolson: Some people had this thing about jumping in icy waters and it was always very carefully monitored for obvious reasons, and someone was there to get you out. The ship would stop periodically and people would get out, walk on the ice. There was usually a drunken party involved, and then they would step back on board. If somebody wanted to go for a swim, the crew would make sure they pulled them back out. But we were stopped one day and we'd had lunch and I noticed there were an awful lot of people looking at the gangway. Eventually I sort of muscled my way to the fore and there was Bob Headland, striding down the gangway with his cap on, and at the very bottom step, he stopped, solemnly saluted and jumped into the sea. But it wasn't what he was doing that was making the passengers and the crew so stunned, it was the fact that he was totally naked apart from the cap that he was wearing. That's a Bob Headland thing. He's eccentric and, as I say, larger than life.

[Part 2 0:58:54] Lee: You met Wally Herbert, then, in the Northern Hemisphere, the North Pole, and you spent quite a lot of time talking to him. I wonder what you made of Wally Herbert later in life, later in his life?

Tolson: Well yes, it was the only time I met him, on board the Russian icebreaker *Sovetsky Soyuz*, and I remember meeting him very early on, at breakfast, and he came down. I was sitting at a table by myself and he came and asked if he could join me and I said 'Yes.' I obviously knew who he was but I was just somebody. But we very quickly got talking and he spilled out more and more of his life. It was almost as if he was trying to ... he just wanted to get it out. Maybe I was just a good listener. He was obviously a very troubled man. He had done phenomenal things in his life: three years expedition getting to the North Pole with dogs, only to be eclipsed by the Americans arriving on the Moon at much the same time.

[Part 2 1:00:12] Tolson: So probably that's why he didn't get his knighthood. In his mind, that's why he didn't get his knighthood. And there he was; we were at the North Pole. All the passengers were out partying, having a barbecue, having been helicoptered across and been put on this ice floe. And Wally Herbert was standing, leaning on the bridge, looking out of the window and he just commented on 'those silly buggers down there', the passengers. And there they were, all larking around, throwing each other about, barbecues, dancing, getting drunk. But what was almost worse was that here we were, forty years later. He had got there in solid heavy ice, and we were surrounded by water.

[Part 2 1:01:08] Tolson: We had struggled to find a big enough ice floe at the North Pole, and even then the ship deemed that they had to take the passengers by helicopter to get to a sufficiently large one to have this party on. So a complete environmental change. As we all know, it is going on but this was early nineties and actually even then it wasn't quite as obvious and public as it is now. But yes, Wally was a sad sad man but incredible artist. He was selling his paintings on board as well and they were so immaculate, you would have thought they were photographs; it was so precise: the pictures of his dogs pulling sledges. But sad, sad.

[Part 2 1:02:01] Lee: What is it, as a final thought really, ...? What is it for you about the Antarctic which makes you go so many years, go back again and again and maybe even pining for it now?

Tolson: Yes, I do pine for it now really. I think for a start, you have almost got to dispense with this 'it is beautiful'. We all know it's beautiful now. It's that feeling that you are only that big. It's that all-powerful place that it is. You are vulnerable. Whoever you are, you are vulnerable and you have got to work as a team. Everybody has to pull together and it is this camaraderie I think that really makes it the place that it is, because nobody owns it. We all know that. We all come and we all go again, but it's the working to make your job, whatever it is, happen, and I just love that: all people pulling together. And yes, you get little factions, where there's problems with somebody for a little while, but essentially you are all doing the same thing. And then throw into that the sheer beauty one day, the horror of the next day. That vile changing, rapidly changing picture that it is. It's unique. It's unique from the Arctic, which you associate with being exactly the same but somehow they are very different, and I would love to go back there again. I doubt very much I ever will but I've had a jolly happy time of it when I've been there.

[Part 2 1:03:48] Lee: Jack Tolson, thank you very much.

Tolson: Thank you very much, Chris

[Part 2 1:03:54] [End of Part Two]

ENDS

Possible extracts:

- [Part 1 0:14:43] Interview with Tom Woodfield.
- [Part 1 0:17:17] Refit chaos.
- [Part 1 0:20:30] Drums of petrol broke loose.
- [Part 1 0:23:31] *Bransfield* pitching and rolling.
- [Part 1 0:39:09] Tom Woodfield's character.
- [Part 1 0:42:27] Navigation problems at Argentine Islands.
- [Part 1 0:46:58] Change to two captains: Lawrence and Cole.
- [Part 1 0:51:23] *Bransfield* vs. *Biscoe*.
- [Part 1 0:54:42] Bird Island work fraught.
- [Part 1 0:57:13] Official looting from Grytviken.
- [Part 1 1:01:17] Argentinians on Southern Thule.
- [Part 1 1:07:58] Chris Elliott and setting a buoy.
- [Part 1 1:11:47] Doubled watches for a fast trip to Stanley.
- [Part 1 1:14:20] Shot at in Punta Arenas.
- [Part 2 0:05:55] Lucky escape from an ice cliff collapse.
- [Part 2 0:12:02] Close encounter with a propeller a 'nasty nasty moment'.
- [Part 2 0:25:37] Disorganised retreat from Mount Erebus.
- [Part 2 0:35:49] Flying and nearly landing a Twin Otter.
- [Part 2 0:47:48] Modern BAS: the fun had gone out of it.
- [Part 2 0:51:32] Inflatable boat in cabin and jam explosion.
- [Part 2 0:54:22] Malt whisky practical joke.
- [Part 2 0:58:54] Meeting Wally Herbert.