

IAN SYKES

Interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee at the Marguerite Bay reunion in Oct 2011. Transcribed by Allan Wearden, 28 February 2014.

Track 1. [0:00:00] Lee: This is Ian Sykes, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee, on the 28th of October 2011. Ian Sykes.

[0:00:11] Sykes: Ian Andrew Sykes and I was born in Wetherby, Yorkshire. My father was a bookmaker in Leeds. Ah! And it was wartime 1943 and as far as I know, er he was or ran the blackmarket in Leeds or part of it. So there wasn't a great a problem with petrol and things, but apparently it was deep snow, and Mum had me in Wetherby and couldn't they get there and my father never saw me for a fortnight because of the deep snow.

Lee: In winter of 1947?

Sykes: er 1947.

Lee: The famous winter?

Sykes: No '43, 1943.

Lee: '43 er What's your birthday, Ian?

Sykes: 10.1.43.

Lee: OK. What kind of education did you have, Ian?

Sykes: I went to a boarding school at the age of 7, er a [Fulmic?] school which is a Moravian boarding school between Leeds and Bradford, at Pudsey and I hated it! And I was there for 10years!

[0:01:21] Lee: You hated all the 10 years?

Sykes: All the 10 years! I walked away with my back straight, without looking back and have never near it since. It was a religious school and they beat religion into you, and they actually beat it out of me!

Lee: Were your parents deeply religious at all?

Sykes: No, not all. I think my father wanted me to be good at sports and things, and thought a boarding school education would have been good for me.

Lee: Did you ever venture into further education?

Sykes: Er when I left school, I worked for the Geological Survey and I did a sort of sandwich course at Leeds University working towards a degree in Geology, but I used to pass the recruiting office on the way up to the university but walked in one day and I signed on in the

RAF, which was a good move for er me, but my parents went ballistic about it, but I have never regretted it!

Lee: As a pilot?

Sykes: No no as an "urk" ha! I, I went in and for some leaflets and the guy asked me what I did and at the time I said at the time I was a very enthusiastic mountaineer and I was right into it in my late teens and my whole time was spent climbing, mostly in Langdale and the Lakes, and they offered me Mountain Rescue and I just signed on the spot. And it wasn't like I was done, as it took me like 6 months once I had got into the Services to actually get myself on to Mountain Rescue, but I spent the next 5 years at

[0:03:19] Sykes: RAF Kinross in the north of Scotland, which is where I've lived ever since really, and it was fantastic, because I got free mountaineering and climbing at the expense of the Services and learnt everything I know from then.

Lee: What point did the Antarctic make an appearance in your life? Had you heard of the heroes as a boy?

Sykes: When I was demobbed from the RAF, I originally worked in Reading, for the *Reading Evening Post* for a short time, and wondered what on earth I was doing there! And decided I would go back up to Scotland, and see what I could manage. And I went up to Fort William and er I got a job as a climbing instructor at a new outdoor centre, Loch Eil Centre which at that time was Toc H, another religious bunch as well, and has subsequently become an Outward Bound School and "Loch Eil" was again, they were wanting climbers to work for them, and I became very friendly with John Cunningham, who was you know, I that time he had been down once, but think went down again and he was very helpful and said I would you know, told me I would love it and started to describe life base and he

Track 1 [0:04:42] Sykes: was one of the my people that recommended me when I applied for BAS, and I really didn't think I would get the job? I was pretty young and er and surprisingly and though my age was the same as

Track 2 [0:05:05] Sykes: most Fids that joined I had done 5years in the RAF and various things, so I was slightly more experienced. I actually got through the interview not too bad; it was Bill Sloman then, plus I can't remember who else. Anyway I got it which you know staggered me, and I also discovered we got paid! Think it was £500 a year we got paid that time. But I thought you went down for nothing, which I was quite happy about and that was it really.

Lee: Had you read about Scott and Shackleton, Amundsen?

Sykes: A little bit, I wasn't a great expert on the subject, but yes to a certain extent any mountaineer had a great affinity with "Shackleton", with what on I didn't know anything like, when you become a Fid how interested you become in the whole thing, but I yes I had but that was not what was driving me. It was the thought of getting out, and dog sledging and climbing mountains and kind thing, that attracted me to it.

Lee: And when you got there was it all you hoped for?

Sykes: Oh yes and more. It was terrific. I was very lucky, I seemed to hit gold on all fronts really. I went down on the *Shackleton*

Track 2 [0:06:37:] with "Frosty" as the Captain.

Lee: Turnbull?

Sykes: Captain Turnbull yes, and I first thought he was the most terse person I had ever met! But then I actually began to really admire him. He was a wonderful Captain. Myself and two friends I had: Phil Wainwright and Ian Flavell Smith, and Phil and I signed on as crew on the ship, working not just as supernumeraries. But we realised we were going to be for several months on ship, and I thought I would die of boredom if I didn't do something. Frosty wasn't keen; he said "you Fids don't do any work anyway!" Anyway we swore blind that we would, so we had to do shifts then as the rest of the crew, and er go on the rest of the projects, and it was the best thing I ever did! Even though it was hard work, it was interesting, and I got to know how FIDS worked much better than if I'd been stuck in the "Fiddery" like the rest of them. So it was really good and that particular year they were building at Halley Bay, so then "Frosty" again helped us and we got a trip down to Halley Bay on the the, what was it ?

Lee: *Perla Dan*?

Sykes: No it was, yes the *Perla Dan* and we were helping do the base there, and we were helping on, in the Falkland Islands helping survey the air strip and various other things and it was quite a long trip down and we were involved with the eruption on Deception Island which was among the most exciting things that happened.

Lee: OK we will come to that in a minute. Tell me what you were doing

Lee: Track 2 [0:08:39] at Halley Bay?

Sykes: They were building a new base, the old base was?

Lee: This was '68 was it?

Sykes: Er '67, '68 yes and we were building the new base, well the old base was bent up inside and was leaking and all the heat had gone out of it, and they were living in a fairly rough and ready state down in it, and the new base was being put up there. We were down just for a few weeks helping and hauling, as Fids do! We were there as man-made cranes, ha! ha!

Lee: So why did you come out of Halley, you obviously not destined to be there for the whole season?

Sykes: No it was just that the *Perla Dan* was going and

Track 2 [0:09:29] Sykes: down and they sent a bunch of us Fids down to do the work; we then came back out. It was rare for Peninsula Fids to actually get down to Halley, so it was very nice to achieve that, and we then went back to South Georgia and we were there for

quite a while and then started working our way down the Peninsula. It was lucky it was one of those years when the ship was going into all the old bases, so it was very exciting we got into Hope Bay and all those old bases, loads and loads of them, can't remember them now and finally got to Stonington in the autumn.

Track 3 [0:10:14] Lee: So how did you wrapped or caught up in the Deception Island scenario?

Sykes: Well we had been on Deception Island; they had been building a new aircraft hangar there and we were helping put up you know, helping put up the hangar. It was real hard work, because they were using a rubber flubber (inflatable raft) to take the all the steel girders out to the shore and mostly we spent our time in the water with our waders and er the stuff would come in and of course the flubber (inflatable raft) wouldn't. You couldn't pull it right into the shore, so we got Fid power to lift the girders out; I spent days and days wading in the water trying to get these girders ashore, with "Big Al" Smith at one end and 6 of us at the other, trying to get them ashore. It was a very interesting time!

Track 3 [0:11:21] Sykes: And then when we finally headed south, we headed back towards South Georgia and we had been going for about a day I think when there was a sudden spin round of the boat and it turned back and was hammering along at full pelt. They told us that Deception Island and was erupting, and actually most of us took it as a joke, because we had the piss taken by Frosty most of the time, we didn't believe everything we were told! It was the real most exciting thing when we finally got there. Frosty went straight in through Neptune's Bellows into the bay with the eruption still going on at a great rate of knots! And when we first went in we were unable to get ashore, because of the danger of the sea level going up and down at a great rate, and er we went outside the island, so we were able to watch the whole thing going off. And then went back in to try and rescue some of the equipment from the base, which we were doing when it started to erupt again, and we did a quick escape. In the meantime the guys that were on, had been rescued by I think the *Yelcho* (Chile)? The Argentinian boat they managed to get them back to us; everybody was OK but it was all very very exciting! And we got loads and loads of photos, typical Fid you know!

Lee: Were you being showered upon?

Sykes: Showered by ash all the time and nothing great, one of the things I do remember and

Track 3 [0:13:14] Sykes: laugh about is that the sheathbills – there were hundreds of the sheathbills came aboard the ship. They don't seem to like flying and the ship was actually covered in sheathbills, sitting being taken off the island, quite happily under manned steam sort of thing. Apparently they are quite good flyers as well, but this lot just sat on the ship and got taken away!

Lee: I guess they couldn't fly through the ash, could they?

Sykes: I don't know, don't know but I have photographs of the ship covered of things, but it was very strange. It was funny going back again. I have been back a couple of times since, and seen the wreck of the island as it first was. When I first went there it was the most beautiful place, the inner bay was all frozen solid and I was climbing on some of the gullies

at the back and it was just lovely, but to go back now and see the devastation that's taken place is quite amazing!

Lee: What sort of thing were you rescuing from the base?

Sykes: Think it was mostly personnel equipment as much as anything. There was loads of equipment on the base and they were just trying to ferry it down to the ship's boat, the *Red Peril*, which we were just loading it up with as much stuff as we could and getting it ashore. It was a real mess and of course the roof of the base was collapsing in with the weight of ash that was falling and at the time we were loading it on, it seemed it had quieted down? Then all of a sudden the whole thing went off again. We got the hell out of it, and that was that really!

Lee: Do you remember anything about the base safe being rescued or reached?

Sykes: No no I don't remember that.

Lee: OK, then I guess you just left to its own devices?

Sykes: Well the problem

Track 4 [0:15:14] Sykes: was we were still heading south, on our plot so I think that held us up. The journey south, it was quite a race then to get us down to Stonington, and I can't actually remember, but the funny thing is, I think I must have swapped boats there on to the *Biscoe*, not too clear on it. All the photographs I've got is us going in Stonington on the *Biscoe*, which is rather odd; my memory is if still on the *Shackleton*.

Lee: When you got to Stonington, you took over a dog team didn't you?

Sykes: Yes, the Vikings yes!

Lee: Were you familiar with dogs?

Sykes: No, never at all. It was John Noble who had them the year before me and he had set them up. They were a beautiful line of dogs he had got; he had sort of matched them up into matching pairs, and I got this very beautiful team. I never thought they were that good, and I did a lot of changing of the team in the early days.

Track 4 [0:16:34] Sykes: And er I was only actually at Stonington for less than a week, when we were taken by ship to Blaiklock Island er there was a group of us: Derek Postlethwaite was the experienced Fid that had been there a year earlier and the bunch of us got landed on the Jones Ice Shelf at Blaiklock Island and the idea was that month or so, a couple of months learning to drive the dogs to get the experience and then back to Stonington in time for Mid-winter. But it was appalling conditions and the problem was we didn't know if it was bad or not. It seemed pretty normal to us because we didn't know anything else! But that particular trip we had a 16-day lie up and two 11-day lie ups and we were unable to get back for Mid-winter. So we were out for you know for the best part of 3 months and what everyone said were appalling conditions were we actually OK, but I think London Office was very worried

about us? And I did hear on the grape vine afterwards, that, that particular trip was one of the things that got BAS thinking that the days of dogs might well be over?

Track 4 [0:18:07] Sykes: Because of the difficulty we had in getting back, it was well after Mid-winter when the sea ice finally formed. In fact we'd one attempt to get back to Horseshoe Island and my sledge broke through the sea ice and was floating around and we had a hell of a job to, you know! We managed to hitch two dog teams on to it, and we managed to haul it out and it was quite frightening you know! It was basically snow lying on the water, so we turned round and headed back. So we spend Mid-winter at Blaiklock field hut and we were actually living in tents and using the hut as a little sort of place to doss. We had plenty of food and dog food, so there was no great difficulty and finally when the sea ice formed up, off we went back to Horseshoe Island and then, back along to

Track 4 [0:19:05] Sykes: Stonington.

Lee: How big was the hut?

Sykes: Oh the hut? It was about the size of a garden shed!

Lee: So you couldn't have slept in it?

Sykes: You could have done. There were actually bunks in it, but there was 6 of us (two groups of three) and it would have been too tight for that and it wasn't very well insulated. As long as you got some heat into it, it was OK. As I said we were OK; we had plenty of food and fuel, but it was warmer living the tents outside. Our big worry was dog food; we spent a lot of the time hunting for seals.

Lee: These lie ups: how do feel about being stuck, where you stuck in the field for 16 days at a time, you were stuck in tents?

Sykes: Well on that particular trip, as I say we had one 16-day lie up where we didn't move at all.

Lee: How was that?

Sykes: It was nice ha ha!

Lee: Ha

Track 5 [0:20:01]Lee: ha!

Sykes: It was interesting you were, you slowly got mixed up, remember at this time of the year we had lost the sun and so though it got light during the day, it didn't you know it was a bit like Scotland we the sun not quite coming up, it and we'd a tendency to er, actually we didn't not move. Most days there was so much snow falling, we had move the tents and dig the dogs out. Er but you couldn't travel in it, so we were stuck, but your days started to reverse, when no point in not getting out of bed you know, you'd wake in and the morning and stick your head out and it would be snowing heavens high and blowing, and the tent was partly buried and you'd climb back into your sleeping bag for a couple of hours, and

assuming you got up normally at 8 o'clock in the morning, that day you might get up at 11 o'clock. We'd go and do a few chores, and by the end of the week or so your 11 o'clock had turned to 1 o'clock in the afternoon and the whole thing began to get kind of mixed up! But we had the daily scheds, you know the radio scheds with Stonington telling them

Track 5 [0:21:34] Sykes: what we were doing, which wasn't a lot but you still had to go out and feed the dogs, and do all the other things that were required, and the difficulty was of course that you got lazy, and of course you got very irritated that you couldn't move. And that particular trip, we never had the likes of it again but we had 16 days and two 11-day lie up's all in the same thing, with deep, deep snow, with us, on some occasions the tent, which is 8 feet odd high was totally buried as of course the dogs and everything were, and it was a daily job to get up and start digging and dig the whole blooming thing out and then re-start! So it was all very interesting, but I thought the whole thing was normal, as it was my very first sledging trip and I guessed that is what you did, it was only afterwards, we

Track 5 [0:22:28] Sykes: discovered it was a bit unique that we'd had a fairly bad weather trip!

Lee: Obviously Stonington and Fossil Bluff had a close relationship, but that particular winter there was problems with Fossil Bluff wasn't there? With more people there than there should be?

Sykes: Yes the Pilatus Porter aircraft had crashed, up on the Polar plateau. Nobody hurt, it crashed on take off and the boys managed to sledge into Fossil Bluff. So there were 4 of them there, I think two of them should have been going home that year and because by the time this happened, there was no other aircraft to come in and get them out and they were stuck. So there were all kinds of problems for them, but two of them had to do an extra year and names gone out of my head at the moment?

Track 5 [0:23:35] Lee: Doesn't matter!

Sykes: But one of them was going to be Base commander at Adelaide I think and didn't make it, and course we were quite anxious about them at Stonington and again they were living in tents outside the hut the generator wasn't working. In fact there is an interesting story about the generator, I remember listening to Barrie Whitaker and he was diesel mechanic at Adelaide and helping, what was his name? The guy that was at Fossil Bluff, I've forgotten his name?

Lee: The base leader there? I'll have to look it up?

Sykes: Well it doesn't matter, he was working the generator and trying to get it going and Barrie was saying try this, try that, try the other! And then very excitedly he said 'Is this sprocket pin coming out?' He said 'yes, yes it is' and he said 'turn the handle if it goes, he yes yes it is, it's doing it!' 'Well in that case its FUCKED!!'

Lee: Ha ha!

Sykes: So they

Track 5 [0:24:45] Sykes: were stuck without a generator or power for the whole of that winter, so in fact as Fids do they settled in and got on with it! But we were quite anxious of them, so at Stonington we decided we would go down as early as we could as a relief party, to the Bluff.

Lee: It was either Ledingham or ...?

Sykes: It was Rod Ledingham!

Lee: Yes in '68, and you were in that relief party were you?

Sykes: No I wasn't it was Ian Flavell Smith and Alistair er who Ali McArthur the Base commander at

Track 6 [0:25:35] Sykes: Stonington, and they sort of went off and then been gone about 5 days when they came up on the radio rather anxiously! And said they were on floes trying to get to George IV sound and they were pretty sure they were on the move and floating about, then in those days nobody had ever been lost, been drifting off on open sea ice and never survived it, so there was a great panic on base, as what to do? They were still sounding fairly confident at the time, but myself Derek Postlethwaite and Ken Doyle put an er inflatable dinghy on our sledges, and set off as fast as we could, down to try and get to them before things got bad, and the weather was really quite bad and snowing and thing and we'd a long long journey. But it was amazing we'd realised we could travel in really appalling conditions, which we really wouldn't normally have done on the bases at that time! And went down right past Terra Firma island and down through and was really quite nerve-racking because it was very stormy and camping on the sea ice, you could hear it cracking and squeaking underneath you, it was really nerve racking! Anyway we, as we approached in within reasonable range

Track 6 [0:27:14] Sykes: of them, the weather actually started improve and it got colder and the temperature dropped down and it was actually in the -30's and the sea ice started to form up really good, so we actually got to the Puff Ball islets just about the same time, having crossed a number of leads without having to use the boat! Er we got just about the same time, so we were terra firma and relatively safe, and the decision was taken that it was too early to right down to the Bluff, so we turned round and headed back to Stonington and which we got back a few days later.

Lee: So the purpose of your rescue mission was to get more and supplies, food and paraffin to them?

Sykes: Well it was really to get the boys off the open sea ice, as it turned out, it wasn't you know things were improving rather getting better.

Lee: Did you have a plan, because if they were, casting drifting on ice floes you did you have a plan, the plan was to use the boat was it?

Sykes: Yes the plan was to use the boat to get to them, assuming it wasn't you know tiny wee floes, floating about we talking big areas of sea ice with big floes. What had happened they'd sledged across open floes, with big cracks but they were opening up behind them! So when

they tried to get back, they couldn't get across; they were on open water, and then they'd gone forward and found open water ahead as well. So at

Track 6 [0:28:58] Sykes: the time they started to get sort of worried, they were afloat without being able to get, but we weren't thinking in the terms of open sea crossings or anything like that! But the idea we could ferry the sledges and the dogs, and things across with the wee boat on to get on the next large area.

Lee: Large area yes.

Sykes: Leads and stuff!

Lee: Do you think in retrospect, you were more worried at Stonington than they were on the ice?

Sykes: I think so yes probably and it was almost the same as what happened to ourselves on the Hind Glacier project that I was telling you before, was when you are there it's not quite as bad, as everybody's imagining that it might be, and we were very cautious you know and we went, I don't think anyone was being fools!

Lee: Fuchs became involved in this particular rescue wasn't he?

Sykes: Yes, he was great. I mean I really admired him, because he understood the problem was ours, and he was giving confidence to do as what we thought was the best thing, and really telling us to be sensible but not trying to give us orders, he ...

Track 7 [0:30:12] Sykes: was terrific, great boss actually!

Lee: You admired him?

Sykes: Absolutely!

Lee: Did you meet him?

Sykes: Lots of times yes, well not lots of times, but on my interview and when I first went and then er the year I went down and latterly with quite a good story on the year I went back, which I'll tell you. Well I built a canoe at Stonington you might of heard about? But this was, I'd been a canoe instructor on Outward Bound, before I went down and I used it for sealing quite a lot at Stonington and it was very good, and I decided to take it home on the way back, and it was on board ship when we stopped in at the Argentine Islands where Bunny Fuchs met up with us, and it was glorious weather. It was Autumn and the sea ice had broken out.

Track 7 [0:31:11] Sykes: And we got the canoe out and was canoeing around the floes you know and things, and the base commander was very upset about it and thought it was very dangerous and we shouldn't be doing it! And kind of banned me from taking the canoe out, which was a bit annoying having been doing a lot more canoeing farther south without any problem. Anyhow luckily Bunny came along and 'I like that canoe and let's have a go', so off he went! So I thought that's it, I've got my permission granted. So he had quite a few trips in it, and I took the decision that it was actually a better home for it at Argentine Islands rather

than taking it back, so I left it there! And I've heard recently that they did quite a lot of canoeing from there and actually got 3 other canoes send down on previous years.

Track 7 [0:32:09] Sykes: And used them, during those years.

Lee: Was there a risk, attached to that canoeing in your kayak?

Sykes: Well there was, in fact I capsized on the first day I built it. I put it into the water and I'd made paddles out of an aluminium tent pole and some plywood and was paddling along and quite heavily pushing, and the blade of one of the paddles which fairly weak plywood snapped, and it was so sudden that I capsized and went straight in you know! And it's quite chilly in the water in the Antarctic and I managed to get out on to a floe, and my canoe was floating away and I'd spent weeks building, this thing you know! So I jumped in again and managed to yank it out, and get it out up on to the floe, and by this time I was really cold you know, but I managed to

Track 7 [0:33:09] Sykes: run back across the floes to Stonington and Ali McArthur the base commander was taken a bit askance when this dripping frozen character charged in, but I had a quick shower and what not! Then went and retrieved my canoe and just totally ignored them when they said it was too dangerous, and rebuilt and made a proper paddle and got on with the job!

Lee: There was one sledging trip, where you went over the Laubeuf Fjord to meet a party from Adelaide; that right?

Sykes: Oh yes! That year, must have been the beginning of my second year, erm! Ian Curphy and Rod Pashley the two dog drivers at Adelaide had no change over, there was no Fids there, no sledging drivers to ...

Lee: To take over the dogs?

Sykes: To teach them how to run dogs, so

Track7 [0:34:13] Sykes: they very effectively taught themselves how to get on with it, but we were working up in the islands to the north and they were coming out. They were going to join us for the summer journey, so we decided to sledge over and meet them as they came off Adelaide and it was really deep heavy snow; they had a terrible journey across. Meanwhile we went across over again to the Jones Ice Shelf rather at Blaiklock and across the Laubeuf Channel to past Pinero Island and met them at what is now Rothera base. At that time there was nothing there, but we did know there had been plans to build a base there! But all it was just a snowy beach, but the boys came down and we sledged back across, and by the time we were about half way across, it was fairly early in the season, the sun had gone down, so we were travelling by moonlight and we had a lot difficulty

Track 8 [0:35:23] Sykes: getting on to the Jones Ice Shelf; they were a lot of crevasses there, not particular dangerous but a lot of holes, slow progress but we got on to the Jones Ice Shelf again in lovely moonlight and there was another party of sledgers over at about 6 miles or 7 miles across the Jones and they kept coming on to the radio and saying 'you must come over, you must come over; it's really important!' So we had this lovely moonlight night sledge

across the Jones, dead flat with the silver light it was just gorgeous! And we got about mile or so from their camp and the dogs got a sniff of the other dogs at the other side and we had this lovely run into the base and they met us out and normally you would see to your dogs instantly, but on this occasion we leaped into their tent, and within a minute or so of being in the tent we listened on the radio to Neil Armstrong land on the Moon! You know one 'small step for (thing) for a man', it was the most glorious situation: there we were in a part of the world where there wasn't single map, no map there. A far better map of the moon than we had! And the great big full moon shining and it was just awesome; I'll never forget it, it was just an incredible thing !!

Lee: Did you feel a kind of an affinity with the Astronauts?

Sykes: Oh We did absolutely! Yes we did!

Lee: Can you try to describe it?

Sykes: Well I think we actually sent telex's, you know we had messages to say, we were sledge Whisky (my sledge was Whisk) a message to Houston you know to say 'Sledge Whisky in Antarctica we listened to you.'

Track 8 [0:37:18] Sykes: We never ever got a reply, but we felt very much part of it, and of course the rest of the world had been watching it on television in a broken up sort of way and but certainly knew what the land looked like, but we had no idea, because we had only listened to it on the radio and there was certainly was a glorious moment! I, I will always remember it. I always thought we would be going there. I thought I somehow would find a way of getting to the stars before I'm done! It's surprising that they have never been back.

Lee: One of the other fids was saying you shared the same vulnerability as the Astronauts: if anything had gone wrong there was no way you could be helped?

Sykes: I think that's right, particularly as a GA. A GA's, it's a fairly lowly job working with scientist but a great responsibility to see everybody is all right. And particularly with coming out of Mountain Rescue as my original job I was always very conscious we were in a very dangerous environment, which didn't seem dangerous.

Lee: Till something goes wrong?

Sykes: Till something went wrong. Fids are very jocular and take things as they come but I found it quite a serious responsibility looking after people and seeing they were all right. I used be surprised at how naive some of the scientists could be! As you really had to keep eyes in the back of your head, as people would walk about in crevasses without any concern whatsoever! But in my 2 ½ years at Stonington we had no accidents at all, and I was very proud of that and I thought it was a good effort!

Lee: So were Armstrong and Aldrin GAs ?

Sykes: I think they must have been, think they would have made very good GAs Ha!

Track 8 [0:39:50] Sykes: Possibly the guy, what was his name going round?

Lee: Collins!

Sykes: Collins might have been the GA looking after them out on the tops. Now you mention it, there was definitely an affinity with it. It seems such a long time ago but it was certainly a wonderful experience!

Lee: You were supporting a geologist called Ali Skinner?

Sykes: Yes yes!

Lee: Were you into geology?

Sykes: Well I had actually done quite a lot of geology at university before I packed it in, so I wasn't totally naive to it and Ali was probably the youngest Fid of all time as he got his degree at a very young age. And we sledged that year; normally you'd have 2 dog teams and 2 guys working together, but in fact Ali didn't have a dog team so we were out with just the one team with the Vikings and we had a tremendous journey. We went down to Fossil Bluff and then up the Otter glacier and on to the Plateau. Where we camped at the site of the Pilates Porter which had crashed, at what was called Porter Depot which was basically all the stuff that was dropped inside the Porter. And Ali was one of those people that

Track 9 [0:41:20] Sykes: couldn't light a primus stove properly and he always had yellow flames bouncing around it! On one particular occasion I can remember I, we were supposed to work together all the time, but in fact it wasn't always practical. What we used to do: I'd drop him off at a nunatak to do the geology of it. I was doing the plane table mapping for him, taking and making and he was putting the geology on to the map, so I dumping off doing his geology and I would go off mapping and on this particular occasion I'd done a series of cairns up this long glacier. We'd gone round in a big circle and I was trying to close my circle and I'd vanished off for a few hours. And as I came back down the glacier I saw smoke rising from the camp site and I thought 'Mm! I wonder what he's burning now', and as I came over the rise, I realised what he was burning was the tent!! The tent was fully ablaze and going, so big panic! So when I got there Ali was jumping around and looking rather askance. It wasn't a life threatening situation; we had a little pup tent we could have used and I felt quite confident that we could sledge to the Bluff with what we had. My sleeping bag had been burned. Ali's was OK; he managed to throw his own out but not mine! What had happened was that he was making himself a brew and been, he'd got a pot of glue out, which he was glueing his mukluk up with and the glue and caught fire and the whole thing had gone up in a flash! So normally in those days you had

Track 9 [0:43:27] Sykes: these Squad call radios, and the radio hung in the apex of the tent at a point, so that had melted and things, so we didn't appear to have radio contact or anything. So I decided to, 'well I think we better head for the Bluff and sort ourselves; we'll get hold of someone from there'. Anyway just as we were all packed up and ready to get ourselves going, I was messing around with the plastic, what was left of the radio and it cracked a bit and it suddenly came alive and there was an aircraft about to take off from Adelaide flying to the Bluff and I said 'Mayday! Mayday!' you know, and of course they thought it was a joke! And it took a little bit of convincing what had happened, but the lucky thing was within 2 hours we'd a brand new tent and new sleeping bag.

Lee: Oh the parachuted the down to you?

Sykes: They just flew them to us. The pilot was a chap called I think Dave Rowley?

Lee: He's here!

Sykes: Is he here yeah,

Lee: Yeah!

Sykes: I always laugh. Well I'd never met him, and it was his first flight ever and he came in flying over, and of course we were very relieved to see him coming in, and he sort of full of the Antarctic myth, you know saw this burnt out tent and two guys standing there, and he flew down, landed, taxied and to the tent then spun the plane round to, I think his idea

Track 10 [0:45:11] Sykes: was to take a nice photograph of it? But the back draft from the thing, we'd been sorting all our stuff into piles and the whole lot got blown off down the glacier, you know! So he jumped out of the plane, smiling, to find these two bearded characters leaping on him and screaming abuse and what not. They all said it was a very strange meeting that he had with us. But anyway we got everything back and going and that was it! That was an interesting little experience!

Lee: Yes absolutely.

Sykes: We then had a fantastic trip, we went right down over to the other side, to I think the Larsen Ice Shelf? On the other side down the Warehouse Glacier with a lot of big holes getting down there, met up with other sledging parties and then came back over the Polar plateau and down Sodabread slope to Stonington. I'd never been up Sodabread thank God! Because when we went in on a compass bearing to find the top of it, and when I looked over I was absolutely shocked. I was expecting a fairly steep snow slope down, basically a gully and we erm decided to camp at the top for the night, then go down the following day, and we took the dogs for a bit of a run beforehand. We didn't want them pulling too hard when we went over the edge, the we kept looking at it and then in the end I went over, with both teams. By then we had been joined by Jack Donaldson and so there was Jack and Ali on one sledge and myself on my own with the Vikings on the other, and we

Track 10 [0:47:10] Sykes: just had 3 dogs pulling the sledge and we'd turned the others loose er, down and we'd every rope and dog chain wrapped round the runners to slow it down. And within seconds once we went over the edge we were sledging past the poor old dogs that were just pulled on to their backs and been literally about a 4,000 foot slide down this incredible slope and at the bottom jumping crevasses, you know? Not big ones, you know!? And I remember just landing in a big heap at the bottom and rolling about with laughter, watching the other sledge coming down as well, it was astonishing! Then a lovely run into Stonington!

Lee: Tell me about the unusual materials for washing the base windows?

Sykes: Oh well Stonington was unique in a lot of ways. BAS supplied all the bases with a bottle of whisky, bottle brandy I think and a bottle of gin, once a month. Now I know normally that wouldn't go very far. At Stonington, because we were a sledging base, I mean in my second year, I was only on the base 3 weeks in the whole time I was there; first year I was about 3 months. But I wasn't unique – everybody was much the same. We were there one day and there was a big build-up of booze on the base; there was loads of it and not a lot of people drank gin, so there was buckets of the stuff! So if you wanted to clean the windows, you just went and got a bottle of gin out and cleaned the windows with gin, you know no problem at all!!

Lee: Was it effective?

Sykes: Oh yeah, it just cleared them.

Lee: I suppose cleaning the windows with water was fairly futile?

Sykes: You couldn't do it, it wouldn't work .

Track 10 [0:49:10] Sykes: I suppose you could use diesel or petrol or something like that? But we'd far more gin to spare Ha ha!! There wasn't as much of the other stuff that got polished away!

Lee: I gather practical jokes weren't unheard of, I gather there was one when poor old Doctor Mike Holmes suffered?

Sykes: Oh yes the bar in Stonington was a beautiful place. I don't know what happened to it, when it was taken out? Something terrible happened to it I think when it was taken out? But it was a very comfortably homely place and we were sitting in the bar one night, Holmes always pontificated in great detail. He was a great raconteur and he was chatting away and he went out to the toilet, and I poured his pint of beer out, and there was a big jar of pickled onions at the side and I topped it up, the juice from the pickled onions and he came back in, and it was incredible the whole of use where watching and he kept raising the glass to his mouth and stopping to talk and he'd sort of raise the glass and then he'd put it down and start telling some other story and then he'd raise it again, and we'd all wait expectantly to see what would happen, and when he finally took a gulp of this stuff, he must have got half the pint down before his eyes started to roll and there was the most incredible thing and then WOOF the whole lot came out!! Very funny Ha ha!!

Lee: What was he like as a man, as a doctor?

Sykes: He was a very good doctor, you know; we always used to call him the drunken doctor.

Track 11 [0:51:03] Sykes: He drank quite a lot and he was a very interesting character and as far as his medical thing, there was none like him and there was the terrible thing that was going on with Ken Portwine, on Argentine islands. Ken was very very ill and Mike did manage to diagnosis what the problem was and was able to do quite a lot to help him. We weren't supposed to, as I was sledging out in the field at the time and they used to come up with these scheds and say this is a medical sched and will everybody turn off their radios you know, and you'd hear all the tuning signals as all the sledges going on! And everybody was

very worried and upset about it, and what happened and of course with what happened to Ken!

Lee: So you witnessed I know it was remotely, by radio how Mike did handled that scenario?

Sykes: Ah yes I thought he did a fantastic job!

Lee: Was there any time when he wasn't coping, was he under pressure?

Sykes: No I don't think so, like all over us he was pretty boozy you know was Mike, but I think in, when the chips were down he was a good doctor. In fact I had a lot of sinus troubles, and Mike did quite a lot to sort me out, that I thought he was a very clever bloke you know! He was, I sledged with him on one occasion, he was full of the myth of sledging but he was hard work to go with, he was not an easy man to look after in the field, but he was keen, keen as mustard!

Lee: Good! A couple of scary incidents, one about sledging on thin ice on George VI Sound?

Track 11 [0:53:13] Sykes: Oh, Well that was our attempt when ...

Lee: That's when you were heading the rescue attempt?

Sykes: Yes that's when we were heading, yes that was on the rescue attempt. Yes we were on quite thin ice for a lot of that trip. And I have to say I didn't sleep much at night.

Lee: Because of the noise?

Sykes: Well there was, I just had the feeling the ice wasn't safe; it was well documented where the ice broke out mostly! But we had to cross between the mainland and Terra Firma Island which is a relatively safe place, but there is a thing called Windy Valley which comes out from the side of there, and there is always these big katabatic winds that come out of Windy Valley. And it was going across there, that we really started crossing quite a number of open leads, not big you know about 3 feet maybe, but dogs don't like jumping them, and dogs getting wet on getting across those, and of course you wonder what you are getting on to? And then the ice was very slushy and you could probe through it and it got very scary. Fortunately the weather improved for us, that was one occasion. The other, I mentioned it before, getting back from Blaiklock island to Horseshoe my sledge broke through I think it was a seal's blow hole because a seal kept coming up, while the

Track 11 [0:54:52] Sykes: sledge was floating about and I'd sort of got one of these big long you know ice chisels, and I was trying to break it away from, and also to try and get the dogs together to haul the sledge out. Fortunately the sledge was floating and the gear was on it. We managed to hitch 2 dog teams together and they managed to yank it out! And that was unpleasant because a lot of my clothing and my sleeping bag got quite wet with salt water although I managed to get them dry out, they were salt contaminated and it was quite unpleasant the rest of the trip the rest of the trip! Sweaty nights with this salt contaminated sleeping bag and things.

Lee: I have to ask you about Ian Flavell Smith chasing his gravimeter through crevasses?

Sykes: Oh yeah that was, we went on a geophysics trip up the back of Stonington it was actually. We went to try and climb what was called Mt Wilcock, I think it might be called Mt Metcalf now, they changed the name. It was a great, lovely trip, very exciting that er the mountain was in very difficult place to get to; we had to sledge up a very steep col with a lot of crevasses about and then down into this sort of beautiful circle where the mountain was, in a very isolated place and we got on to this col and were sorting things out and Flavell was taking some gravity readings and all of a sudden, his gravimeter fell over and rolled off down the slope and of all things he just ran after it!? And they were holes all over the place, and I absolutely panicked, you know. I just grabbed a rope and screaming after him trying to yell at him to stop. Luckily the gravimeter just stopped, but he must have gone over and number of holes and things!

Track 12 [0:57:10] Sykes: And extraordinary that nothing happened thank God! And I think a gravimeter in those days in the late sixties cost about 5,000 quid then, so it must be about £50,000 of gravimeter that was bouncing down the hillside. You could see where he'd run after it, but very, very serious and luckily it was OK and still working!

Lee: Are you a bit of a song-smith on the quiet?

Sykes: Yes yes I sing and I play the banjo badly!

Lee: What's this about a song called *BAS knows best*? Was that you?

Sykes: Yes that was myself and (pause) Oh! Jack Donaldson wrote it between us, we wrote 2 or 3 songs there was one called the *Hanger builder* which was about building the hanger on Deception Island before it blew up and the other one was *BAS knows best*, which again was about Deception which was the thing and it was my first ever published song. It was published anonymously in Fuchs' book! But I was always very proud of it!! So I sing that, at occasion drunken evenings!

Lee: I guess this is about Halley, the base with bendy legs!

Sykes: No that's not me!

Lee: That's not you? No definitely not!

Track 12 [0:58:37] Lee: OK alright; your 2 years were up. Did you think about reapplying or where you happy to finish?

Sykes: No, I'd actually reapplied and did think I was going to come back down and I'd managed to get a job in Mt Hood National Park in North America, and so I thought I'd go and work there for the summer, and go down the following year and everything seemed to be going according to plan. But we'd hitched South America and I really wasn't very well, very well the whole time! We'd got arrested in Uruguay as suspected guerrillas and we'd quite a bit of difficulty in getting out of there!?

Track 12 [0:59:35] Sykes: And when we finally got back to Montevideo luckily the ship, one of the BAS ships came in and we got a lift home and I was quite ill for a while and I never

managed to take up the job in, in the Mt Hood National Park. And I got offered my old job, in fact the chief instructor's job at the Outward Bound school in Fort William, and when I went back up this little shop came up for thing, and without any intention of it becoming, anything at all it seemed a good idea. So I never ever took up the job and started this little shop and it grew into quite a large business!

Lee: This is Nevisport?

Sykes: Nevisport yeah and that was it.

Lee: You've picked up some awards Spike? An MBE, not for the Antarctic, for sport and mountain rescue?

Sykes: Yes, I was on the mountain team, in fact if you include my time on FIDS.

Track 13 [1:00:42] Sykes: I joined the mountain rescue in 1960 and I didn't, I stepped down from the main team in 1999 so I was 40 years in mountain rescue so I got, I was involved in one or two fairly interesting rescues over the years, and I surprisingly got involved with the setting up of Nevis Range, the ski area, and at the end of that I got an MBE which was really from a lot of other people's efforts rather than my own, but there you go!

Lee: How does the Antarctic rate in your life?

Sykes: Oh! It was the best time of the lot; I would love to go back again you know!

Lee: Go back tomorrow?

Sykes; Oh I'd go back tomorrow. I went back in 2002 (was actually 2005!) you know on one of the Fids' trips, and I suppose it was sad really. The dogs were gone and it was a different world. Still young people getting stuck in and doing it though you know! And I suppose it would be hard for a silly old codger to go down and try not to be too know all!? Ha ha!

Lee: Yeah yeah!

Sykes: It's a different world, but no I'd love it. I think it was the

Track 13 [1:02:22] Sykes: most, the thing that most stuck me having gone into a business life afterwards was that if your radio broke down when you were on FIDS, there's nothing you could do about except get the manual out and fix it. If your camera packed in, you got your wee screwdriver and you set out taking to bits to see, what how it worked! If you couldn't fix it, it was done. So you were entirely involved in what you did, how you achieved things under your own steam, and I think that really helped me in my business career, because I was never really afraid of having a go at things, so I went about it in a different way to other people. In our shops I was basically just a shopkeeper over the years, but we made our own shop fittings, and we did all shop fittings ourselves and saved 10's thousand pounds, hundreds of thousands pounds over the years in doing that. So it finished up quite a large business and you know it was unique and very Fid-like in its operation.

Lee: Ha ha! It's been great fun. Thank you Spike.

Sykes: OK.