

GEORGE JAMES

Full transcript of interview conducted by Chris Eldon Lee on 7 July 2003 at Grayshott in Surrey. Transcribed by Elizabeth Edwards, British Antarctic Survey, 29 August 2007.

DISC ONE

George James : My name is George James and I was born on 20 August 1924. It seems an awful long time ago now, but there it is. Time marches on, doesn't it?

Chris Lee : What was your career like before FIDS?

George James : Well, I joined the Navy when I was 18. I was very young and, as you can imagine, must have been so to be. I was one of the youngest down there, I suppose, later on. But I joined and went to HMS Drake at Devonport. I was a Devonport rating and went into the wireless telegraphy section.

Chris Lee : Was that by accident?

George James : No, I actually chose it. I did apply for a commission, to be truthful, and I was turned down because I lost my temper, rather - which was the wrong thing to do with the Board.

Chris Lee : What happened?

George James : Well, my father had died a few years before and, I've never known anything like it, but everybody seemed to be nice except one person on the Board, who just sat looking at me and saying nothing. Until at the end he said, "You realise that losing your father at a young age will go against you all your life". And I'm afraid it hit the wrong nerve and I said, "Well, I'm sorry to say it, but whilst there are people like you in the world, it certainly will". So I thought, "That's finished that, you know".

But they called me back in and they said, "Look, we were going to offer you a commission, but unfortunately that's out of the window now, but you state what branch of the Navy you'd like to go into and we'll see that you go into it". Well, not having been in the Navy, of course, I couldn't make a comparison between them, but I thought, "oh well, what the heck, wireless branch", and that's where I ended up.

Chris Lee : So it really was a decision, which was random really?

George James : Oh yes. But I'd always been keen on that but never really practically done anything. But I joined HMS *Impregnable* down at Plymouth, which was very pleasant, pleasurable actually, because I played a lot of rugby and played in the cricket team. In fact, one of our star members of our cricket team, or star, I say that in a funny way, because we used to all love him, but he wasn't much good at cricket, was the chap who was the Padre on the *Exeter* in the Grassway battle.

Chris Lee : His name was?

George James : I forget offhand. But Russ Conway, the pianist, was also in that, but he was doing the official signalling course. But when I first went, for a few months we slept in hammocks in a hut, you know, a sort of drill shed, which was a quite big open space. And he used to sit up in the corner playing the piano to us all the time.

Chris Lee : Was he any good?

George James : Well, honky-tonk if you like. We had a very good pianist, who got nowhere, whereas Russ Conway became famous and made money, you know. That does happen in life, doesn't it? But there it is.

But *Impregnable* was good. I enjoyed it and of course we got steeped in naval discipline. I was there for nearly twelve months' training. It's a long course, actually. But then I had to go to Glenall camp in Plymouth for drafting and that was an experience, to see people coming in and the different places they were going to, men bringing in draught checks, people going off all over the ocshon now.

But I was actually sent back to South Wales, I had compassionate leave. My mother had been taken ill and I went back down, first of all to Swansea. But I only got into Swansea and they sent me straight back to Cardiff and said, "You'd better stay at home". But I was doing DF calibrations in the Bristol Channel.

Chris Lee : Which are what, George?

George James : DF calibrations. We'd would take out different operators, depending on the type of ship – commercial or naval - and they would take a bearing on you, visually and with their direction finder. And then they could calibrate exactly the deviation around the dial. And I did that for – ten or twelve months now – ten months. And it was quite interesting actually, that, because we had some rather good ships, or people. I got to know a lot of people because I was helping out, also fitting 87 sets, for communication with aircraft, which was beginning to come quite the thing then.

So that was quite eventful. But it seems strange being back in Cardiff for it. But, then of course, the next thing was I was sent back to Plymouth for re-drafting and they sent me to the other end of the earth instead.

Chris Lee : So what happened in 1939, when Hitler was making a stretch - you were in the Navy at that point?

George James : No, I was, it was the beginning of '42 when I joined the Navy. But, no, I was actually at that time in what was, ARP it was called in those days. And I had quite some experiences in various air raids. In fact, I was near to somebody when the first explosive incendiary bomb was dropped. We had incendiary bombs up till then and a lot of soft ground around us, we were in a sort of heartland, where the base was. And we used to, you know, jump on them more or less and get them back into the soil and they'd go out.

But on this occasion, one of my colleagues went and jumped on it and it exploded and it killed him actually. So I was involved with that for quite a bit.

Things could have been so different, with that, you know. It's typical wartime. You just had to accept what happened when it happened, as it were. But Cardiff had a very nasty raid and I can remember seeing it was a very, very cold night and there were sixteen landmines. Now a landmine was taking away a street more or less, because four or five of them did go off and a lot of damage was done. But these others would have created mayhem if it had all gone off. But the fuses were stuck or something, but they just didn't go off. So we were very lucky in that sense, you know.

Chris Lee : The lottery of war.

George James : Well, this is it. That's why I say. I mean the draft sheets that were coming in to people. I mean one chap near me was drafted to Siberia. He said, "I thought you had to volunteer for this. And then you had the usual story, "You have volunteered and off you go".

Chris Lee : So tell me about the call to go South, how did that happen? The call to go to the Antarctic?

George James : Well, that. I didn't actually choose it, although I did enjoy it, I must admit. But I went from here. I was drafted, my next draft was HMS [indistinct] it was called, which was actually the Falklands WT. And I went down there, but that was almost a holiday going down there, because we went in convoy, it was on a blue sterline boat, the New Zealand Star. We went in convoy across the top of Ireland and then we broke away and went all down to the Atlantic on our own, zig-zagging quite a bit, but nevertheless it was a straight run down. And got to Montevideo to find out that the Fitzroy was the communication between Montevideo and the Falklands. And she'd sailed a couple of days before. So we had to wait a month for her to come back up again, which was real hardship. We were put into a hotel and were told "get on with it, but keep in touch, as it were". And I had quite a good time in Montevideo.

Then I went on down to the Falklands when she arrived back and I reported to the wireless station, obviously. In fact, it wasn't a question of reporting. There was a lorry waiting to take a few of us up there. So I settled in to watchkeeping in the Falklands on the radio side. Because that was quite a big radio station.

Chris Lee : What sort of work was it doing?

George James : Well, we were almost controlling the South Atlantic. We were doing broadcasting. For British and allied merchant ships and GP ex-ed broadcasts for Navy ships. We were in touch with the Admiralty in London, cruise stations up the South American coast. We also used to speak to Bergen in Norway three times a day. But of course we also worked the bases that were down in the Antarctic. Because at that time, well, it was always explained to me that the weather in the Antarctic has quite a large bearing, one can deduce a lot of things from what's going on there as to what's going to happen elsewhere. So I think they made that quite an important part of their work and it was coming up to us and we were sending it straight through, it was going to the Admiralty, going to Dunstable I think it was, not in those days. I think that's where it ended up. But it may not be there now. But, the weather, they were all collated then of course and dealt with.

Chris Lee : So you were receiving weather information from the Antarctic bases. In what form was it arriving?

George James : Six letter groups - six figure groups.

Chris Lee : In morse?

George James : Yes, in morse. All our work was in morse, they did very little, well no RT, not in those days. You became quite proficient in morse because you lived and breathed it, you know. In fact, when we were doing these broadcasts, so much power had been taken out of the system, as it were, that we had a couple of generators up at the top part of the base and every time a morse signal was going out, you could read it by reading the lights. The lights used to dim, you know, you might be eating a meal and you'd be reading the morse coming through. But, you couldn't do much else there – you did your job and ..

Chris Lee : Was the base in Stanley, or?

George James : It's just outside. You know in Stanley, you've got an inlet of water and it's about three miles up to the top and right ahead of that was this, that was the wireless station. I've got a tear. That was where the transmitters were. But half way up was the control near what they did call it, a racecourse. But the operating station was there and the ... I can't say it for the moment.

Chris Lee : It doesn't matter, George.

George James : It just shows you how bleak it was down there in those days.

Chris Lee : So what sort of buildings were they?

George James : Concrete, concrete buildings. In fact, when I first went there, it was a wooden hut we slept in and we used hammocks. There were There first thing, and hammocks. But later on when I went back the second time I'd had promotion and I had my own room then in a hut. But, it was a very busy wireless station, but we also had one mumbay, continually on 500 kc's for commercial traffic and we had one or two incidents there when, you get; every quarter of an hour you'd have a break for silence for any emergency signals that come on, you know. But, nevertheless it was quite good. Of course, every thing you did - everybody else could hear.

Chris Lee : So tell me about these – you said there was a couple of emergencies.

George James : We had one for instance, a ship on fire off Bel Paraiso, that was came on one of them. And that was, we managed to, we took quite a part in it, and eventually a destroyer went out from Bel Paraiso and took the people off.

Chris Lee : So you were relaying the signals that saved the ship, saved the people?

George James : Yes, yes. Whatever happened in that area, mostly it came through the Falklands, the radio work anyway.

Chris Lee : So you were at Clapham Junction, were you?

George James : Yes. We'd been doing high speed morse with Norway, weather conditions permitting. But a lot of that was, Norwegian, from the whaling station and the whaling ships that were down there. Quite difficult to do it in plain language, because we didn't know Norwegian and you couldn't even imagine what was coming next, as it were. You had to keep abreast of it all the way.

Chris Lee : So just explain that to me a bit more. You were receiving a message from where?

George James : From the whaling stations and the whaling ships that were down there. I remember one, it's a long time ago now, but the Southern Venture was down there and they, most of the crews on our ships were Norwegian, particularly the gunners were nearly all Norwegian, and Bergen was their main base in Norway. And they used to go on what we called Bergen Radio. And that happened, as I say, three or four times a day. It's interesting work, mind you, because we broke South Africa and [indistinct] South Georgia. The bases, the bases had their own code signs. ZBH was South Georgia and I remember Base A was GMNE1 and there was GMNE2, GMNE3. We used to work them as well. And it was a job I enjoyed doing.

Chris Lee : So when, just to focus on the Norwegian traffic, for example. What were you, did you know what the messages were you were translating?

George James : No.

Chris Lee : Because it was all it Norwegian?

George James : It was all in Norwegian. Didn't have a clue what it was [lots of laughter].

Chris Lee : And you were suddenly relaying them back to Bergen from?

George James : Yes. But this was what was happening. We were sending traffic up to the Admiralty and for the Foreign Office and people like that. And, as I say, these weather reports from the bases, which were getting more and more. I think they sort of started off lightly and then gradually they were doing more of them. We were always told that that was quite an important part of the traffic that went through the station.

Chris Lee : Did you every have any problems with the equipment breaking down?

George James : No, but you used to get a lot of interference and that. You had to try to read the morse through the mush as it were, you know. But we didn't have any breakdowns. Because we had quite a few people on the station, we had something like forty wireless operators altogether.

Chris Lee : So you were twenty four hours a day, were you?

George James : Yes, it was open twenty four hours a day, but we worked in watches obviously. In fact, when I first went there, it says something for discipline, you know; when I first went there, there was a Petty Officer who was in charge of our watch, who was very very strict on discipline, lovely chap he was, Nobby Clarke, I'll always remember him. He saw to it that our watch was really up to the mark, even so far as, he even went so far as to check on one person who looked to me as if he didn't wash very often, examining his underwear and making sure he was. He said "I want to see it every week. But," he said "that's how you've got to be when you're in a place where people really had nothing else to do, you know". And he was good. But when I went from the Scoresby, later on, back there, I took over a watch myself then and four of us – they sort of re-arranged all the watches – and four of us were put in charge of a watch each, and we were all in that Nobby Clark's watch when we joined. That's the point I was trying to get at, saying how useful his discipline had become, you know. But you can see from that, that was in the transmitting room. That was a distance away from where we were actually operating. But look what happened in those days, that was a valve down there, a spare valve?

Chris Lee : The equivalent of that is much taller than a man, isn't it? Much taller.

George James : Well yes it is, and nowadays. Quite a little box like that. It's a different world now, of course.

Chris Lee : So tell me about, how it was that you were assigned to the Scoresby. At which point did?

George James : Well, I'd been there about, this was getting about nine or ten months or so. And the Scoresby had a wireless operator, a man called Charles Avril, I can always remember his name, I can't tell you why. But anyway, he was leaving there and the Chief PO called me in and said, "George, we're sending you down to the Scoresby to become. There was a single operator on the Scoresby. And anyway, off I went and joined the.

Chris Lee : But when you joined the Scoresby, were you still working for the Royal Navy?

George James : Oh yes, I was in the Navy all the way through. Well, yes, because she was a naval ship, although she was down there, it's something that seems to get mixed up in all this. You get the Fitzroy and the Eagle and that. They were all private people, they weren't service people. But the William Scoresby had actually been there doing minesweeping duties before it was taken over. You probably know the story of that. Captain Mac Casey brought her down from, he didn't bring her down, he brought another ship called the Bransfield, which they had to leave at Falmouth. You probably know that story.

Chris Lee : You weren't there at the time?

George James : Oh, no, no. I came along later on, you know. In fact I've got a, I've put these out as I thought they'd come in handy. But the, that's the Scoresby there.

Chris Lee : Oh, yes the famous photo.

George James : But.

Chris Lee : She looks quite a drab little ship.

George James : Well it looks that way. You become fond of things, you know. If we were to talk of it as a naval ship, well, it doesn't really bear any comparison, with a naval ship. But it had been down there doing research into whales and then it was taken on for this purpose. It was a super ship really, because, I mean it was bounced about a lot at sea. But you'd got confidence in it eventually and you just ignored the sea, because you knew wherever you had to go, it would go, sort of thing. And that's the good thing I think about this.

Chris Lee : So the confidence came from?

George James : From the experience of just being there with it, you know. And, of course, the crew were all very good. The crew was a bit of a mixture when I got down there. Because she'd been down there about seven or eight months before I joined her and there were people from home who were Navy men and there were Falkland Islanders, who all had a naval rank, but they weren't really Navy men, if you know what I mean. But they were damned good sailors and that's what was necessary. Because somehow or other, the discipline of the Navy was different altogether, you know. It wasn't a fighting ship in that sense, in that you had to have other rules. But Captain Marchesi was super.

Chris Lee : What was it about him?

George James : Well, he gave you confidence because you knew that he'd done quite a lot. He was down there on Discovery, too, before he went back down with the Scoresby. He was a very knowledgeable man, but he wasn't a brash individual, nothing like that. You met quite a few officers who were, got somewhere by shouting at you all the time, sort of thing, but he wasn't that type at all. But people all trusted him and he was a superb navigator, which is very important of course. He'd done hydrographic work. I remember once in the Falklands carrying his theodolite and what he was doing I don't pretend to know, on the other side of the harbour, and I was there holding the [indistinct]. But he was a lovely chap and I did enjoy being there for his sake.

But what happened was they brought in a number of Falkland Islanders, a coxswain, a chap named Luxton. Well, he was a Falkland Islander. But, as I say, not a Navy man, but by God he knew his job, like, and the sea.

Chris Lee : So the civilians and the Navy ratings, do they mix quite nicely?

George James : Oh yes. There were about 23/24 of us, I suppose, altogether. And there was a nice atmosphere on there. I didn't join them if they went up the pub. I'd never done that myself, but I didn't mind, they could do what they wanted to do, you know. And I managed to keep a track of my music and I listened to my music while I was out there.

I had one incident that was rather funny, on the mess deck. I'd got friendly with the chap who was the Assistant Governor, if you like and he was rated as the Customs Officer and a few other things. His name was Alan Carr, I think he worked in the Colonial Office doing his job. But his father actually sang at Sadler's Wells. And anyway, he brought me back a book which I've got here, from Punta Arenas in Chile. He brought this back - you see - from Alan Carr, in 1946.

Chris Lee : What's the book? "The Story of One Hundred Symphonic Favourites", by Paul Brown.

George James : I forgot what I was saying. On the mess deck, he gave me Beethoven's Emperor Concerto in five records in a sleeve, you know. And one of our stokers said, "Eeh, this looks nice". And he picked it up like that, lifted it up the wrong way and out came two of the records, smashed on the mess deck. And I thought oh, dear, dear. But couldn't do anything about it, they'd gone then [laughs].

Chris Lee : So you had an old gramophone wind up?

George James : yes and we just kept it going, made one out of three in the end and we still kept it going.

Chris Lee : Electric or wind up?

George James : no, wind up. We had no mod cons there. I mean this was the point, the ship, Captain Marchesi, I mean he had to navigate it with sextons and what have you, because there was no radar, we didn't have radar at all. I mean, sometimes a seaman would go up into the crow's nest when we got into any difficult spots and they'd come down really frozen, you know. But that's how it had to be, those were the only conditions you had.

Chris Lee : So, was it comfortable in your cabin, or?

George James : I was lucky. Because of course, it was the radio cabin, it was aft. And I had a bunk and a small dressing table in there as well.

Chris Lee : You lived in one room?

George James : Yes, I was one of the luckiest ones on the ship, really, because I had all my equipment in there. On the other side of the flap was the coxwain's cabin.

Chris Lee : So you had to be listening out, twenty four hours a day, I would guess.

George James : Yes, but I used to put Stephan?? on the speaker, but I could close my eyes a bit and still listen, you know. But I did enjoy it on there. Of course, eventually I talked afterwards about what went on in between. But I left the Scoresby about January 1946 to go back up to the Falklands and I took over . We were really doing bringing in a lot more commercial routines, then because the war was over. Although I did get into hot water once. I allowed a cruiser, I didn't know where she was at first, HMS ...[indistinct].... Was out in the Indian Ocean and I was going to pass a

message through to the Admiralty. Now I was waiting, we had [indistinct] ... not long after that.

But aboard the ship we had to change the frequency which was up at the other part of the station to the frequency used to [indistinct] ... the ship. And then change it back again to the Admiralty. I thought it would take about ten minutes or so but it took an hour and a half. He sent all his lists of people who were looking for demob when they came home – names, ages and all the rest of it, official numbers, ships numbers, they had the lot you know. And I eventually managed to get off and the first thing I got was a blast. [indistinct] Please understand that in future you will only come to Admiralty and not to ships at sea for this particular purpose. Because we had a routine at certain times. But all our transmitters were being used up, you know. But they didn't like it of course, this is what's happened. They know what you're doing because they can hear it on the air.

Chris Lee : So when you joined the Scoresby, you heard the words “Operation Tabarin”? What did they tell you?

George James : Well, the object of it was to sort of create a presence, if you like, down there. And of course I'd read other things about it as well. About the fact that the Germans had sunk some Norwegian ships, particularly the whaling boats that were down there. But nothing much more than that. In fact, really, we were just creating a presence and claiming a certain amount of land for the British Government. And then put up the Union Jacks, or the Union Jacks were on the bases. That was the principal of the thing, you know.

Chris Lee : So the critical factor was to be there, full stop?

George James : I think that was it more than anything else, because in truth there wasn't much we could do as a ship to stop, say, a German cruiser, or something like that, you know. There was no way we could even think of doing anything about it. But the fact that we were there created the presence, that Britain, in that part of the world, as it were.

Chris Lee : Were they thinking beyond the war?

George James : I think they might have been. I should imagine they probably knew. Of course I wouldn't know. But they probably knew about the Argentine approach. Well in fact, it went to an Argentine base and they were more or less hanging on to it. But they couldn't in the end. But I've got some photographs to show you of that as well. But I think that possibly that was one of the reasons. But nevertheless, the basic principle was I think to create a presence in the area, which then made it much easier later on for whatever was going on, for making an official claim on the land.

Chris Lee : Did you actually ever have any contact with the Germans, anyway?

George James : No, no, no.

Chris Lee : Were you, did you listen to them on the radio?

George James : Oh yes, I listened to DAN quite a lot. Not their ships, but a lot of their traffic used to come through Hamburg, which was DAN. I used to listen to them quite a lot.

Chris Lee : Were you able to understand it?

George James : No, but some of the traffic was sent back in, you know, and I suppose if you get stations all over the world sending traffic in, they can, it gives them an overall picture doesn't it, you know.

Chris Lee : So you were relaying German messages?

George James : No, no, not much, only a little bit of it.

Chris Lee : Back to the Admiralty?

George James : Yes, yes. But the Admiralty knew pretty well all that was going on. As I say, they were listening. I mean the sort of thing that happened on the radio, you know. I mean we were in the Scoresby, just outside, not far from Port Stanley, and we had some water in the fuel and it was creating a problem. I mean going towards Anandovit?? I sent off an emergency signal, trying to get hold of Port Stanley, which wasn't far away. And they didn't hear me. But I got "Go ahead" from Ottawa in Canada. And they relayed my message to the Falklands. Hard to understand, but of course this does happen, you get these skip distances in radio. In fact, we had an ionosphere stations. Some nice chaps came down to do that and they set up an ionosphere station down there.

Chris Lee : On Stanley?

George James : Yes, in fact, when I came home, the GPO had set it up with me coming home and you say, I hope this time it will be a lot better than the one I got last time. So what happened? "Well", he said "on the way home last time" he said "I was in Norway, in an island, Spitzbergen or somewhere near there, and" he said "we set up. I had a few Norwegians with me and we set up an ionosphere station again. And blow me," he said, "in came a German destroyer. And they sent a landing party, so we got into a long, what appeared to be a, tunnel. Well, they messed up all the equipment, so when they eventually went, because there wasn't much there to interest them really, only what they'd just done. So anyway", he said, "I spent, I had it all in bits and pieces and it took me nearly three weeks to get something working and when we eventually did, I got a signal out and we were picked up by a British destroyer. But", he said, "it was a few weeks before I eventually got back to the Admiralty and they said, "Well, look, you'd better go home on leave and we'll send for you when we want you. He said, "When I got home, I knocked on the door and my wife fainted – she opened the door and fainted when she saw me." She'd had a message that he'd been killed, missing, yes. "And", he said "it was quite upsetting, that, but anyway this time nothing else like that could happen".

War time was very difficult. You didn't know really what was going to happen when you were in general service. But, of course, once we'd got down there, we were rather out of it in a way. In fact, it caused one or two rows in amongst the operators, because

some chaps who'd been in action didn't like the fact that we'd had a lot of time out of action then, if you like. But then you meet people like that, anyway. Another one came on my watch and he actually opened an envelope and there was a card – mentioned in dispatches - all gold edging and all the rest of it, lifted it up and looked at me and said "Say nothing", he said, "I don't want anybody to know". And, you know, people are funny.

Chris Lee : He'd been awarded?

George James : Yes, he told me later that his ship had been on fire and he'd rescued somebody from the wireless office and he was mentioned in despatches.

Chris Lee : And he was on the crew?

George James : No, he was up on the wireless station.

Chris Lee : Right. So were there characters on the Scoresby when you were on it that you distinctly remember? Who sticks in your memory?

George James : I can remember them all, but funnily enough the one I got most friendly with, I've got a job to remember his name. The Chief Engineer, I think his name was Schofield, but I'm not sure, but he was a super chap, he was. But he had to move out because we had a lot of problems with boiler tubes. But the one who, I think, carried most of the, what can I say, discipline, there, was the coxswain – he was a Falkland Islander.

Chris Lee : Who was he?

George James : Luxton, his name was. He knew his job, no doubt about that. But all the seamen from the Falklands, they were used to that sort of life, you know. One of them, a chap, he had hands like hunks of beef, they were built that way. You see, in those days the Falklands was a tougher place than it is now with the airplanes flying in, there were no airplanes then, not when we were there. It was just, get on with it sort of thing, you had to go back in the state you were in. There was one lorry that used to take us up there. But it didn't have the same facility. Like on board the ship, we had no facilities at all, really, we were.

Chris Lee : How did your engineers sort out the boiler tube problem? Do you remember?

George James : Yes, well there were a few occasions when he had to replace things himself, but eventually we got into Montevideo and it was all, you know, had a refit, as it were.

Chris Lee : So was he having to improvise?

George James : Yes. He used to block tubes off as well, not exactly dangerous, but I know they used to block tubes off. But it was causing quite a problem.

Chris Lee : There was concern, was there?

George James : Yes, not for safety and that, but for operational purposes. But the crew on the Scoresby were a good bunch, they used to stick together well. They, you know, they'd always be doing something together. We had a coxswain and an able seaman down in the mess. One chap, for instance, he had a habit of leaning out and giving me a thump on the shoulder every time I walked past his bunk, because he was invariably lying in his bunk. But we used to have a laugh, because we got friendly, you know, and that was it. One old hand, he'd been twenty-odd years in the Navy and he couldn't read or write, I used to read notices to him, it was no use to him, but he was a bloody good chap at his job. I think this is what the Scoresby was like – they were all good at their job.

Chris Lee : Can you remember his name?

George James : No, we used to call him Stripy, a name for anybody with three badges in the Navy.

Chris Lee : So he had three stripes and still couldn't read and write?

George James : Yes, but he was the only one like that. Most of them were very good. We had a leading seaman who was very intelligent, very good, and. I did enjoy being amongst them, you know. In fact, wherever we went, they seemed to know exactly what they were doing, I think that was the easy thing.

Chris Lee : Tell me about some of the typical duties or typical runs that the Scoresby would do.

George James : Well, mainly it was going to the bases, you know. First of all, we used to do some trips around the island doing various things. Then a couple of times, taking people back into the hospital. And we'd take mail when they couldn't get to places, and things like that, you know. So round the east and west Falkland. But then, its main purpose, of course, that was in the close season if you like, was then to get on down. On the one year, it was 1945, we went down in November time and we got right down into the Bransfield Strait and we just couldn't get through the pack ice and we had to go back to the Falklands. We were back there, I suppose, ten days to a fortnight, round about that mark. And when we went down again, we were able to sail right through. The ice of course does vary and particularly at that time because it's just opening up, isn't it?

But then, my first trip was to Deception Island. And I remember that vividly for the man that I met down there who was well known in the Antarctic – a chap named Jock Matheson who'd been down there with Discovery and various other ships. There again, a terrific guy, tough as old boots he was. But, on the way down I was reading a book called "South Latitude" by F D Omanney and he said that whenever I think of Jock Matheson, I can always hear him saying, "I think I'll make a bit o' hash". And that was just in a book. But when we were down there, I was ashore now, talking to Norman Lather, the wireless operator, and somebody came in, big chap with a beard, I hadn't seen him before. And he said "I think I'll make a bit o' hash". And I said "your name wouldn't be Jock Matheson, would it?". And he said, "that flipping old man,

he's been talking about me again". Now that was something that stuck in my mind, you know.

Chris Lee : So you learnt about people's reputations, because there were so few of you?

George James : Yes, he was an old, what can I say, Antarctic man, you know.

I was given a job while we were at Deception Island and then the Post Office in Port Stanley asked me to frank, how were got them I don't know, because they were from South Georgia, I believe.

Chris Lee : That's right, they're photocopies of postage stamps, they're rather small.

George James : They gave me reams of them, but over-stamped Deception Island. And I had to frank them in between, see there - part of the franking would come out on each of four stamps.

Chris Lee : So there were four stamps in a quartet and you had to frank the cross between the four stamps

George James : And I had sheets of them.

Chris Lee : Why were you stamping them?

George James : Well, they're only of value, aren't they, when they've been franked. As that is now, that's no value at all.

Chris Lee : So, a collector's, this one?

George James : Yes, and when I got back a couple of weeks later, they asked me if I'd go up to the Post Office in Port Stanley and they paid me 27/6d for labour. There was just ... They said, "you did the job for us and we'd have to pay somebody else, so there's 27/6d.". I always remember that.

Chris Lee : So just to clarify then, George. You were doing this work, where were you doing the stamping - on the ship?

George James : No, on Deception Island, at the base.

Chris Lee : So, somebody had sent the stamps up. Had you taken the stamps with you?

George James : Yes, they were in sheets in a bag, you know, and.

Chris Lee : From South Georgia?

George James : No, they were brought, oh yes, from, we took them over, they delivered stuff and they were in a bag for South Georgia, and they were taken back

then to the post office in Port Stanley and ultimately sent to whoever it was they belonged to, you know.

Chris Lee : This was purely commercial?

George James : Well, yes, I mean, I was going down, so could I go and do this rather than the other.

Chris Lee : But they had to be stamped on Deception Island?

George James : Yes, they're not allowed to stamp it, say, they could have stamped it in the Falklands, couldn't they? But they can't, they've got to do it at the point of nomination, if you like. But you'll notice on here, there is the William Scoresby, this is there. This is rather blurred, it's been done on a computer, I expect. The original, my son's got in a frame down at his home. And there's Discovery, too.

Chris Lee : So William Scoresby on the 9th and Discovery too on the sixpenny stamp. I'm just going to ask you to pause for a second.

We're looking at a photograph of the crew at your time and there's a chap down the front there, called Jim?

George James : Jim Turner. This photograph was taken at the Central Uruguayan Railway Club. Because he was from Carlisle and he's always been employed in railway companies and he went out there when they set up the railway club in Montevideo. In fact, he used to take us to the railway club once a week to have a meal and that and I've been to his home as well, with a few others. He always entertained British seamen, whoever they were.

Chris Lee : Doing what?

George James : Really, food entertaining.

Chris Lee : Hosting?

George James : Hosting, yes. But on this occasion, it was what they called [indistinct]. In other words, a barbecue, because they had an animal they were roasting over a spit, you know. Lovely, it was, there. But that's quite nice to keep, really, because it does remind me of so many of them now. But the Falkland Islanders came afterwards, you know, they. Because she went down then and I went on to the roller station. And later on, when I went aboard the Scoresby, then there were these Falkland Islanders all working there.

Chris Lee : So tell me a bit more about. The Scoresby wasn't working alone, was it, there were other ships?

George James : No, because we went from there as well over to. We went to Port Lockroy. That's what I used to like, Port Lockroy, the ship coming up through the Le Maire Channel was lovely, I used to think. Then also, Hope Bay, afterwards. The Eagle came down to set at Hope Bay and then I went in there later on, afterwards.

Chris Lee : Did you have much to do with the other ships? Face to face?

George James : Well, a bit, yes. The Fitzroy was the, actually, I see it's mentioned that it was chartered, but in actual fact it was the one that was employed, owned, by the Falkland Islands Company. And their offices were in Weymouth, funnily enough. And she used to come up and down once a month to Montevideo, really, and her main job was supplies and mail and what have you for the Falkland Islands. I think we used to treat it as, or used to think of it as their own ship. So we were with her a bit. A little aside on that one. I did go to Captain Pitt's – Captain Pitt was the Master of that. I don't for the life of me know why I had to go there, but I did go for something or other and he wasn't there, but his wife tickled me. She switched on a switch and suddenly from the side of the fireplace, two eyes were looking at me. I thought, "What the devil", you know. And it was the outer skin of a whale's eyes that were made into the light fitting on either side of the fireplace. They were weird until you got used to it.

Chris Lee : This is his home?

George James : His home in Port Stanley. I always remember that. In fact, Captain Marchesi mentioned it while we were having lunch.

Chris Lee : Were the Eagle and the Fitzroy, were they of a similar status to your ship?

George James : No. Actually, it's one reason why I get upset about that. That's about, the Eagle was a different type of ship. The Scoresby had one drawback, it didn't carry cargo. Other than that, I think it was the best of the three, but as I say, it didn't carry cargo. Now, the Fitzroy was a commercial ship and I think that's the reason why, when they went to Hope Bay, the Scoresby went through the pack ice to get in, but they wouldn't risk the Fitzroy going through, it might have been an expensive job if something had happened to it. But, anyway, he, in this book says that they both went over but failed to get through, but the Scoresby had gone in. But reading that book, I don't want to be childish, anything like that. They did a good job and they had a lot to do and they did have some dangerous times, but nevertheless you read that as though there was only one ship there, like. And that's what I resented.

And the other thing is I've read now quite a lot of books about this and notes and what have you and Captain Marchesi is never mentioned. The Scoresby is mentioned all the time, but Captain Marchesi isn't. Whereas the other ships, you mention them with the Master, that's common. I've thought of it and because we're the Navy and we were something apart in that sense and we didn't have perhaps the freedom of the ships that were not Navy ships. I don't know why, but I think we deserved more, because when Operation Tabarin started, it started because Lt Commander Marr was given command of it, but his second-in-charge was Marchesi. So he was appointed, actually, right at the outset as being the deputy leader, if you like, of the expedition. So he had everything to do as far as what went on.

Now, Marr was in overall charge of the expedition, but Captain Marchesi was more or less in charge of the sea-going aspect of it. One wouldn't think so, as I say, to read that. Like, he also mentions in there that it was in there that they had a radio

communication set up by a link. Well, all they used to do was when the hub was being built, because a couple of weeks had taken place for that, and until they'd got the radio working, the Eagle was passing the messages up to the Falklands. Because, ultimately, all the traffic from the bases came to the Falklands, because we used to work them four times a day and all the traffic was then passed through and we didn't process any of it because it wasn't our job, but passing it through to London was, and that was done by the various bases themselves.

Chris Lee : do you still have that detail, when you say passing it through, was it passed through directly, or was it noted down at Stanley and then relayed later, or did you pass it through directly?

George James : It was relayed later on, you'd get the messages from the different bases and that.

Chris Lee : And you'd write them all down?

George James : They were all on naval message pads and then, for instance, the weather reports were all individual message pads with little boxes for the groups, as it were.

Chris Lee : So you'd collate them and send them back?

George James : We used to send them off. We had one teleprinter operator and we'd put it on that, but mostly we'd send it by hand. That was a little trick we had, we used to put it on a broadcast and they'd be doing it by the automatic head and sometimes we'd just switch it off and carry on by hand and then the trick was that doing it that nobody noticed it when the break came. Lovely training for a wireless operator.

Chris Lee : Explain this a bit more, George.

George James : Well, sending a signal, for instance. And sometimes, because of the weather conditions, we'd be doing it on higher speed morse, if they had a receiver at the other end that could take it. And then we'd slow it down.

Chris Lee : By pressing the button for less frequency?

George James : No this was all done automatically, there was no key at all then, because it was all gone through, the teleprinter operator used to do it. The longs were two holes like that and the shorts were, went through the heads automatically. But we'd be doing a message, you know, we'd arrange it, switch it off and carry on and send the rest of the message by hand and get the others listening on the loudspeaker to see when the break came. Most of them, you'd see it, but now and again we could do it and they wouldn't know and that was a pat on the back to us.

Chris Lee : There was something also that I read in Mice of Men of using five figure ciphers. Were you doing that? Can you elaborate on that point? For five figure ciphers and one time- pan?

George James : Yes, that was in the. You mean the coding that went on. Well that was in the. All the weather reports were in cipher, which was in numbers, but we also used to, at first a lot of coding went on. Because it was presumably a secret operation, I mean they talk about it there, but to my knowledge they didn't do much of it; in fact, by the time they came down, it was into '45 and when the war finished there was no need for secrecy. But I had a copy of the British secret cipher, so we used to code up from that, you know, and it was done on a one-time pan, it was a long time ago.

Chris Lee : What's a one time pan?

George James : Well, it was, you used the date and the month and the day and that to get your indicator group right at the beginning and then that was the finish of it, you didn't have a repeat one afterwards.

Chris Lee : The code was changed every day?

George James : Yes, but I don't remember too much of it, because we didn't do an awful lot of it, to be truthful and, as I say, it was sixty years ago. But when I first went there, it was all hush-hush, as it were, but in actual fact the BBC did broadcast something on the overseas service and let the cat out of the bag a bit, well in advance of anything else.

But I don't think it was really necessary to be so secret, because once you're down there and people soon know that there's a presence, although they don't know what's going on, but perhaps they're not interested, because it was twofold – it was to create a presence and also to check if there were any German radios around in the area, and quite obviously, there weren't. We had Port Lockroy, we had Deception, Hope Bay, over to the South Orkneys, where the Argentines were based, and South Georgia as well. So there were quite a few places around.

Chris Lee : You said you had mentioned briefly about the BBC letting the cat out of the bag. Can you tell me more about that?

George James : Well, I've only seen notes of it but they made a programme, when the situation was still supposed to be secret and they broadcast a programme on the Overseas Service that mentioned the fact that Britain had ships in the area, to create a presence in the area, which I imagine they were trying not to let it become known. In fact, we went over to the Argentines, South Orkneys, which I've got here and this one. For some reason, we couldn't find out why, but their ship, the Chacos, their supply ship, and they hadn't been able to get through, so we went there and gosh they were hugging us, they were so excited. But you can see, there were four of them in there and the other six were in there, in their graves, and it was a very cold place.

Chris Lee : is this Hope Bay?

George James : No, this is the South Orkneys, Laurie(?) Island this is, one there and one there [must be pointing to a map?] . [inaudible, they have moved away from the microphone]. Now that chap there, he was their wireless operator. Now, he took from his uniform, and he gave me a badge off his uniform. He gave me that off his uniform.

Chris Lee : which you've still got?

George James : I've kept them, not for any particular reason. He took that off his uniform and gave them to me.

Chris Lee : So it's a red circle with five red zig-zag lines, like the electricity warning lights ..., coming out of it, maroony red.

George James : That was one of the ordinary naval signal pans [a lot of inaudible remarks] and that was. I just did that to record what it was. And he also gave me that, it's got pots (?) in it.

Chris Lee: It's a balaclava.

George James : I kept it rather than throw it away, because it's got a memory anyway.

Chris Lee : Just going back to the ships working together. You rather suggested that, perhaps I'm reading things into this, but was there a sense of difference between the naval ships and other ships, or did you all work together?

George James : No, it wouldn't, in fact I would never even think like that. That book made me think that this chap is, rather, making more of what they were doing than anybody else. What he's doing, he's glossing things up to sell a book, isn't he? That's what's happening.

Chris Lee : Do you mean Captain Shepherd?

George James : Yes I did, he was a lovely chap. And he actually came onto the Scoresby a few times; when we first got down there I got to know him. He actually asked me to go onboard the Eagle to talk to their wireless operator, to make friends with him, because I think the wireless operator was a little apart from the crew, who were pretty tough guys on there. But Captain Shepherd was a super chap, he was lovely to deal with. It was needed because she could carry cargo, that was the big thing. So quite a bit of cargo had to go to Hope Bay, so they chartered her to come down and see what her function was – doing Hope Bay actually.

Chris Lee : Would you generally escort her?

George James : Not always, we did quite a few times. I mean we went down, the Fitzroy, he mentions this in his book. The Fitzroy came down with us, we took down an oil barge and the aim was that the Scoresby needn't come back up to refuel all the time. Now, the Fitzroy towed that barge and we were not very far behind her, all the way down. But he mentions this and makes quite a thing of this, escorting, how Scoresby got its fuel oil and set us up, you know. We had nothing to do with it at all. But they came in while we were in Deception. But Fitzroy was the one that towed it and, as I say, we escorted it. But they beached it in Deception and we were able to go back there and refuel. That was quite something to see, as it was quite a big barge. I was surprised at just how big it was. But it carried quite a few tons of fuel, which was very useful for us, you know.

Chris Lee : Did it make just one journey?

George James : Yes

George James : What about the Trepassey?

George James : Well, she came later on. Before that you know, the Eagle ran into trouble.

Chris Lee : It got damaged?

George James : Yes, well, that was in Hope Bay.

Chris Lee : Can you tell me about that?

George James : Yes, well what I know of it, anyway. They went in, the weather changed, an iceberg, I think moved and caught their clipper bow and chopped a bit off the front, as it were. They didn't quite know what to do at first, but I think the weather cleared and they weren't going to take in too much water, so they decided to come back up to the Falklands, obviously they meant to get home. I was actually ashore when we were all given a shout to get back aboard quickly and we sailed and went down and we met her off the Shetlands and escorted her back up.

Chris Lee : Did she look bad?

George James : It could've been much worse than it was, put it that way. In the meantime, they'd stuffed the hole with various things. I think they put cement in it when they got back to the Falklands. I mean, it was a dangerous situation, there's no doubt about that, but they managed to survive it. But Captain Shepherd was a good seaman and, because they'd had a rough [indistinct].... And that was the end of her then, because she came back up home and was condemned, back in Newfoundland. I think it was the following season that Trepassey came down. There again, I can show you.

Chris Lee : Was there a lot of concern? You must have heard that one of your companion ships had been badly damaged and was making this voyage.

George James : They sent a signal and got us to do down. They asked for the Scoresby to get down and escort her back.

Chris Lee : Was your captain anxious about it?

George James : Yes, because anything could have happened, obviously. I mean, if we'd run into really bad seas, the temporary packing they'd put in there could have come adrift and not much could have been done for her then, you know. You see, I think the difference in those days was that all the ships were just ships, without all the trimmings that you've got today. They can go down now and press a button and it'll tell you within yards of where you are, that sort of thing. Well, we couldn't do things like that and they had to radar to plot icebergs or anything else

Chris Lee : But I was thinking of when word got to you that the Eagle was in trouble. Was that a demoralising?

George James : Not demoralising, but we were all worried, obviously, because we knew anything could happen. So we got down as quickly, I mean we were delayed a little bit once again with this [indistinct] but we did get down there, I think, within. She was slow, like, coming up and we were about three days getting down to her, but, three or four days. But anyway we met her just off the South Shetlands and then we stayed almost yards from each other, from there all the way back to the Falklands.

Chris Lee : Ready to evacuate her if need be?

George James : Yes. But that was very necessary. Do you know, there was a nice feeling between everybody. Perhaps I'm being a bit bitchy talking like that, but it was the impression I got and frankly I resent the oversight of Captain Marchesi, why I don't know, but I just feel that he deserved far better, but he was a very modest man and that might have a lot to do with it, because you know, people get hurt when they speak out don't they?

Chris Lee : You were going to tell me more about the Trepassey?

George James : She was a different ship entirely.

Chris Lee : Oh yes. There she is, sideways on. She had quite a high superstructure, two masts.

George James : Yes, yes. I got into trouble once. The same wireless operator was aboard and I couldn't read, he was doing signals with the lamp and I just couldn't read it and I can remember Captain Marchesi saying, "What the devil, surely you can read it", I said, "No, I can't". So he said "We'll have to ask about this when we get in harbour. And anyway we got in and he said, "I'm sorry George, I was having a spot of bother, I was lying on my bunk and I was using the lamp through the porthole". And of course every time the ship rolled, it was going out of focus.

Chris Lee : But, generally speaking, communication was very accurate, was it? Or was it all a bit Mickey Mouse?

George James : No, no, it was very good, and we were in visual contact most of the time. We didn't communicate by radio that much because it was all done through the Falklands, you know, through the Falklands SWT. But then we had routines, I mean I used to speak to the Falklands four times a day. I mean, once we were at - again, I did the wrong thing I suppose, but - Lt Commander Marr had a birthday party in Port Lockroy and a few of us went ashore and we had the ship's dinghy with us and anyway, I had to get back aboard because I had a routine with the Falklands and I'm rowing back towards the ship and I'm not looking where I'm going, I'm just, ships behind be sort of thing and all of a sudden I could hear shouting and I turned round, I'm missing the ship by about a mile. And they called me [incoherent].

You see, I was told off because I could have caused a lot of trouble for other people if I'd gone passed it, you know. And I think you've got to be careful down there, whatever you do, because the circumstances - well you've been there yourself - they're a little unusual to say the least and you've got to give credit to the conditions that you're in, I think.

Chris Lee : So, let's go back to the Falklands, when you're on Stanley, for a while. You were obviously in communication with various bases – all the bases or just special ones?

George James : No, all of them. Well, there were only the three, there was Deception, Port Lockroy and Hope Bay.

Chris Lee : All with the same frequency, they all had daily routines?

George James : Yes.

Chris Lee : What was the feeling when somebody failed to contact you?

George James : Well, they didn't. There was a delay, but not a complete breakdown, you know. There was, but I think I wasn't there at the time, I think Deception had a generator blown out. Well, they'd obviously be concerned, but I think somebody went from Port Lockroy or one of the other bases to check on it. But obviously it opens up any problems, but it used to be quite useful as well because Sam Bonner, down there, was quite ill for a while and we were on the intercom with the doctor, I was passing quite a few messages.

Chris Lee : what sort of messages?

George James : Well, they were, just medical treatment that they gave. But eventually he had to come home and I think he died but I think he had cancer after he got home. But I think at this time he'd had a stroke.

Chris Lee : Yes. More than one.

George James : Yes. But, I often wondered. There was a Mrs Bonner. It's a little aside again, I hope you don't mind. But on the Scoresby, we had a chap, Johnny Hendle, came in, and he'd been on the cruiser, The Black Swan, that was sunk. And Mrs Bonner's son was killed alongside of him. And, do you know, she used to come down when we put into harbour and this Johnny Hendle was a first, he was a real draw to her because.

Chris Lee : So, Bonner was a Falkland Islander, was he?

George James : Yes. The chef on the ship was a Falkland Islander.

Chris Lee : But can you remember the nature of these messages that were being sent to Deception to help him?

George James : No, I can't really. But there wasn't a lot of treatment they could give him. That's the trouble. I'm pretty sure that was the case. It was a question of just resting and waiting and see, you know. But eventually of course, they got him back up to the Falklands. I mean even in those days in the Falklands, the hospital was a very ramshackle affair, not like it is now, there's wards and what have you. There was a small ward, but it wasn't much.

Chris Lee : That must have been one of the biggest fears of the people on these bases, that they became ill.

George James : It could be a real problem, I should imagine. Because, I mean Norman Lather I knew quite well, who was at Deception. He was saying that some of the weather we had to contend with in the winter was pretty horrendous, and things could happen then, couldn't they? So, it was a very risky proposition, but nevertheless I've often been sorry that I didn't apply to go back down there. But I came back and I got married, like a lot of people, and that was the end of that, you know.

Chris Lee : We're darting about a bit, but it doesn't really matter. Wasn't Marr on the Scoresby when he felt he couldn't carry on?

George James : No, he was actually ashore.

Chris Lee : Tell me the story.

George James : Well I don't know it all that much. I talk to him when he was back aboard, he wasn't well at all. But he was at Port Lockroy. Anyway, he came back with us and he came back up to the Falklands. And he was certainly not very well, there was no doubt he had to get back home. But I've heard since that he eventually had cancer and that might have been the start of it, you know. Because they were a bit uncertain as to what it was when he was down there. But it was a pretty awful thing. Because he was the one with tremendous experience. I mean, he'd been down there on Discovery, too. He was known from the land point of view and the sea. Because he was an officer in the Navy. Captain Taylor took over from him, that's right.

Chris Lee : How was Marr when you saw him on the ship?

George James : Well, all I could see was that he certainly wasn't well. He spent most of his time in his bunk. You could see there was something radically wrong, but more than that I don't really know. But it's a pretty awful thing because, as I said, there's no means of treating them properly down there. There wasn't then, but there is now, I imagine; there seems to be facilities for all sorts of things now.

Chris Lee : Was the fact that Marr had to go back seen as a bit of a crisis?

George James : Well, not really, because we had somebody who could take over, he was a very competent person to take over. I think if there'd been nobody like him about, then it could well have been. I mean, they might have been closing a base if there'd been nobody of Captain Taylor's standing. I didn't have a lot to do with him, but I used to admire the work that he did, they used to do quite a lot of my photographs [indistinct].

But they were very knowledgeable people. I mean, I tell you the sort of people that get down there. I'm going back to the Scoresby again. Dillwyn John his name was. Now he became the Director of the National Museum of Wales. But he was down on the Scoresby in 1925, researching into whales, and he alternated between the Scoresby and Discovery too until the war came in and he came back into this country, he was in the services. But he was very, very knowledgeable and, as I say, ultimately he went up in the scientific world and then got the position at the National Museum, which is a beautiful place, in Cardiff. But he, I was led to understand, I don't know how true it was, that the cabin that I had as a wireless office was his cabin when he was on the Scoresby. But I never, I used to think of it but I thought, "Well, he doesn't want to know me", so I didn't bother. I've often thought of going into the museum, but he's been dead a few years now, but there it is.

Chris Lee : So, some of the work the Scoresby did was to change crews on the bases?

George James : Yes, take people back and forth.

Chris Lee : Tell me about the work, what sort of work was it, what was it like to be involved in that?

George James : Well, it's a bit difficult because everybody [incoherent]. Although, again, I was divorced from that because I had my cabin, as it were. But those trips didn't take that long because they were usually, if they were coming up it was usually on the Fitzroy or something like that. But it changed between bases. You weren't at sea that long, and.

Chris Lee : Was it an exciting trip to do?

George James : Oh, yes. I got to know them all quite well, one way and another. In fact, I noticed that Norman Lather swapped over with Farrington, when Farrington was at Port Lockroy and he came to Deception and Norman Lather, who'd got on well at Deception had gone to Port Lockroy. He took a group with him to go and set up Hope Bay. There was one still aboard, I understand, who was doing. A Mr Davis, who was up in North Wales. I have spoken to him briefly on the phone but I didn't have a long conversation. But it is nice to talk to them again. I must say Captain Marchesi, well it was a real red letter day for me.

Chris Lee : How did he seem?

George James : Fine, he's getting on a bit now, but he was great, and he was as lucid as ever, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I wish I could meet him more often, but I've not been in touch. I thought I'd ring him later on and tell him that we'd met and [incoherent]. But I thought he was great in that he was, he didn't flap or anything like that and that's a bit [incoherent], particularly in an office when you've got other people under you and everybody respected him. And, as I say, it was a marvellous thing for me to go and meet him again.

Chris Lee : Did he seem undiminished by the years?

George James : Yes, as far. Obviously, he looks older, but other than that, you wouldn't notice any difference, only his appearance, which we all do, we all get older. In fact, my granddaughter wouldn't let me go up to London on my own, because I've got this, you know, I had an operation, I had a metal valve put in my heart and I've had three by-passes and then I'd been in bed three days and I had a stroke. So it all came together and I get a bit confused if there's too much going on around me. And I got a bit annoyed. I said "I can get to London on my own". She said, "Gramps, you're not going on your own, I'm coming. So she came into the [indistinct] Club with me, and he was very nice to her. But, as I say, life goes on, doesn't it?"

Chris Lee : Let's take a break.

DISC 2

George James : I'd been reading a book somewhere and there was a reference to the fact that William Scoresby was a famous seaman who was from Whitby and anyway, one fine day I did ring there and I spoke to, I didn't know where to ring so I got hold of the Librarian in the Library, and she said "Well, I didn't know if he'd be pleased that I'd give him your number, but there is a man here who's written quite a long book about William Scoresby, the man, as I say. He's got quite a history in Whitby. It seems that a lot of the fishing and everything evolved from him or whatever went on in Whitby. I've never been there, so I.

Chris Lee : He was a kind of Founding Father of the Whitby fishing fleet?

George James : Yes, that's what I imagine. However, he's a very well known Whitby man. And then, not so very long ago, I was watching the programme on the television and it had a flash of, it was about the Falkland Islands and there was like a sign there – Port Stanley twinned with Whitby – and I thought, "Well, by gosh". It seems that the only connection I could see was in Scoresby, the ship, and I thought, "There's got to be a connection there somewhere". How we could find it out, I don't know. But anyway.

Chris Lee : You were telling me about the steering of the ship, you sometimes [indistinct].

George James : Well, that was only just a small personal thing. My cabin happened to be near to it, it was the steering engine that, I often used to compare it to a [indistinct] ?pump on going off, you know. But if you were in a heavy sea and the man at the wheel was having to use it a lot, this would be going off like a traction engine, it made quite a noise. But it also reflected if you had a good seaman, who knew what he was doing and could almost ride the waves, if you like, he could steer and you would very rarely hear it, you know. They were superb, some of the chaps there. But I always remember that steering engine going – pup, pup, pup.

Chris Lee : This was in the aft of the ship, the stern?

George James : Yes. It's the aft to flat, as it were, a crescent type of thing, with. The coxswain was on one side and I was on the other and the officers were in between, as it were.

Chris Lee : What was she like in a storm, the Scoresby?

George James : Well, she used to bounce all over the place. But, as I say, once you've been on there a while you had the utmost faith in it, it never worried you. But I did mention this spill at the bank, Birdwood Bank. We used to come across that and what used to happen was. Birdwood Bank was like an undersea mountain, if you like, insofar as it's made [incoherent] very shallow water, and when you used to meet that shallow water, then things used to happen. The captain always used to tell us and we used to tie a few things down, because it did get a bit rough, and it was always across the Birdwood Bank.

Chris Lee : Which was where, geographically?

George James : Well, I don't know. In my own mind, it used to be between Montevideo and Port Stanley, but he tells me it was between Port Stanley and into the ice. I can't quite remember which one it was, but it was somewhere along there. Funnily enough, when I had lunch with Captain Marchesi, he was saying to me, "You know, in all my years at sea, I've only been really worried once that the ship wouldn't come back to rights, and that was crossing the Birdwood Bank. So it did have a significance in that it was quite a particularly rough area there.

But, you know, the weather down there quite often was like that. Because, of course, Islas Malvinas is the name of the Falklands - islands of the strong winds, I believe. I remember coming up the jetty on my hands and knees because the wind was so strong, it's well known for that.

Chris Lee : You were saying that you've taken the stores that were due on the Argentine bases as well.

George James : Yes, well. We went to the South Orkneys, and we went over there to. I'm just looking for these photographs. I thought I'd shown them to you once, but I must have got them mixed up. Anyway, we went to the South Orkneys and we went to one bay - the, I think it was called Sandefjord Bay on Laurie Island, and that's where the Argentines had set up their base. They're over their somewhere [photographs?]. There were the photographs of the graves and that, I had. As I say, we went into there because it's a met station, a weather station, the Argentines have had for some years, but it did appear that nobody had got into them for some while, heaven knows why but they had been a long time.

Chris Lee : Abandoned, you mean?

George James : Well, no. They missed almost a season in getting in to replenish their supplies and that. And they were quite emotional about it when we got in there. But, it was quite interesting in that they were, sort of, just being like that, and we were more or less just keeping our eyes open to see if anything had been going on.

Chris Lee : How do you mean?

George James : Well, we were looking to see if they'd been, you know, claiming the place, if you like, for the Argentines. In actual fact, I think, if I remember correctly, we did make them take down an Argentine flag and we put a British one up there. But they were very nice people, there were a few of them. We took them in supplies and some things that we had and they gave us quite a bit in return. I can always remember, one thing they did give us a lot of was Edam cheese, with all that, you know, with all the whatsername on the outside of them.

Chris Lee : Was this going to the Argentine base, was this?

George James : Captain Marchesi's in the middle there.

Chris Lee : Going to the Argentine base, was this something that you did on behalf of the British Government, or just something..

George James : Oh, no, it was part of Operation Tabarin, you see. That was creating a presence, we had to create a presence in there, because we were still claiming that as part of the British.

Chris Lee : So were you delivering your protest note?

George James : No we didn't send any notes in and that, but I did actually send a, I can't remember this very much, but I sent a signal as being from the Postmaster at Coronation Island to the Governor of the Falklands. It was all just in the process of making sure that people knew we claimed it as ours then, if you like. But, as I say, it was so bad there, the weather at times, that that's what we found, that six of them had died from the cold. Their graves were right outside the hut. But then, a couple of days after we'd got there, this ship, the Charcot, it's a narrow isthmus, she came on the other side and they got there [incoherent] .. officer with some of the crew of the Charcot, that was the supply ship for the Argentine base. But that's something, now what we did there.

Chris Lee : Sorry, the Argentine base was what, where was it geographically?

George James : South Orkneys, Laurie Island. But we went round to, in fact the Fitzroy came in first, not on that occasion, on another occasion, came in and left a hut for the whole crew to put up later on, which we did. And there was quite a kerfuffle about one, because I understand since that it was almost in the penguin rookery, but there was no signs of penguins when we were there anyway. But it became one perhaps, afterwards.

Chris Lee : You were telling me about Captain Pit's table lamp?

George James : Yes, well, that was, we had a few mementos of the, because he used to do something with South Georgia with, as well. And he had the head of a harpoon and I must say it looked rather nice. He'd had it cleaned up and chrome-plated and it was made into a table lamp. They were quite heavy and quite a sizeable thing.

Chris Lee : On board ship or in his house?

George James : No, in his house in Port Stanley. He lived in Port Stanley, right near the harbour, there. But, he had quite a few things because he'd lived there for quite a long time and, as I say, his main function was to work as part of the Falkland Islands company and their main job was provisioning the island, as such.

Chris Lee : You mentioned Ted Bingham, as well, you met Ted Bingham.

George James : He was on board as a passenger, going between one or two of the bases. Captain Turner had been on there as well, at one time. I mean, I met quite a few of them, but I didn't know the members of the bases, not intimately if you like, not closely, then. Only the wireless operators, Norman Layther and Farrington. But Farrington was the main operator and Norman Layther, he was a New Zealander. I understand he's dead now. Somebody recently had to write an obituary for him.

Chris Lee : How did Bingham strike you?

George James : Well, he certainly knew his job and he seemed to be a nice sort of a chap. But of course, he had no direct contact with us, he was just in there as a passenger. You see, I didn't really get to know these people very, very well, because unless they came talking to me, it wasn't my place to go talking to them, if you know what I mean. But it was interesting to meet them, because, do you know some of those men on those bases were very, very clever, even if they were in their own field and I was a little bit in awe of that, because they did know what they were doing. But I feel the seamen or some of the chaps who were on board with us, who were ordinary guys, but they were marvellous seamen.

Chris Lee : When we talked over lunch about Marr being stepped down, I got the impression that you were rather surprised that Taylor was appointed?

George James : No, I wasn't. I didn't know them all that well.

Chris Lee : But you thought that Marchesi should have been..?

George James : Well, I think he's never been, he started off being, shall we say, second in charge of the operation, but it was never acknowledged as such down there by the people as concerned and I think probably, of its own volition, it changed from them appointing people on the bases to be, whatever, and he was just captain of the Scoresby. But he was more than that, because he had a lot to do with setting up the whole operation.

Chris Lee : You would think it would be normal for the second-in-command to take over, wouldn't you?

George James : Yes you would. I don't understand that, so I didn't have anything to do with it really. But

Chris Lee : Was it because Marchesi didn't blow his own trumpet?

George James : Well, he was the type of man who wouldn't blow his own trumpet. But on the other hand, it might well be that they were, if you like, changed from the

showing a face and creating an occupation there to producing something from the expeditions. You know what I mean, it has two elements to it and it may well be that that's the reason why people on the bases would then say, "he's in charge, and he isn't" and so on.

Chris Lee : So you feel the scientific work was taking more precedence?

George James : It started to take more precedence and, of course, there was always a large emphasis, too, on this weather aspect of it. Because we did, I must admit we used to send hundreds of groups of figures through to Dunstable. We were always sending weather reports, you know.

Chris Lee : The idea was to get it right, wasn't it?

George James : Yes, but well, you can do morse just like that, you know, it was like reading a book, there was nothing to it. Because we also got some from down the South American coast, as well, we used to get them. Punta Arenas and Chile, we used to do. I always did weather reports from Punta Arenas. In fact their morse, their call sign was CCN, which when it's sent garbled it's like, da da da da da da , and that's CCN. But you wouldn't think so to listen to it. And I had one guy who had been a cartoonist on my watch, and he's there listening to this and I thought he was writing and then he produced a cartoon he'd done of the operator at Punta Arenas in Chile, slouched in his chair, with a big sombrero, a blanket over his shoulder and he's working the morse key. It was rather apt, you know.

I wanted to show you some of what the facilities, on the Scoresby, for instance. That's the [indistinct] heads, if you like.

Chris Lee : On board deck?

George James : Yes. But we got into one storm when we came out of. We were in Deception Island and the storm blew up and we had to move out of there to just make [indistinct] and out into the Bransfield Strait and we were there for about three days, a tremendous storm. And we lost every cup and saucer on the ship on that trip. But I can remember, to get into there, Captain Marchesi, we couldn't use the rest of the ship, we were taking in a lot of water and we had to climb up all over the rigging to come down and go in through the manholes at the top.

Chris Lee : Into the loo?

George James : Yes. But you can understand that when I show you two of these here. These are two of the ship when we were in a rough sea. I mean the rest of it is walking around all that spray. You can see what a difference it was those days with the ship to what it is today.

Chris Lee : She does seem to be shifting an awful lot of water and keeling at a strange angle.

George James : Well, that was in some bad weather obviously. But the thing is we only had about this height from the deck.

Chris Lee : that's about five feet – four feet.

George James : You're right near the water all the time.

Chris Lee : Were you resorting to the pumps a great deal?

George James : No, surprisingly not. But, I mean it was going back through the scuppers all that time. But it was, they used to take a lot of like that. We had one occasion, on my radio, when we went off the air, because the battery boxes had filled up with water and they were, a bit you know. But they took in water and it corroded the terminals.

Chris Lee : They were up high, were they?

George James : Yes, they were, well not very high, but at least they must have been seven or eight feet up, anyway, up above us on top of one of the [indistinct]. You can see what we were like and that's how we used to do our washing.

Chris Lee : Describe it, George.

George James : Well, we didn't have a facility as such, a bathroom as such. The officers did, but that was only small, but we had the same as you saw, on the one side, the port side. On the starboard side it was just a metal cubbyhole, if you like. So, you'd take a bucket in there and have a good wash. But, and of course, that's the only way you could do your washing. But you could dry it in five minutes, put it down the engine room.

Chris Lee : So you're washing your clothes in a bucket on the deck?

George James : Yes, on the deck. But, then. I've forgotten what I was going to say now.

Chris Lee : Taking it into the engine room to dry it?

George James : Yes, there was something else crossed my mind, I was going to mention then. Oh, there was an incident. We were actually paid. I can't tell you how much it was, but we were paid hard-line money, because the conditions weren't good, obviously. But there'd been a small force of soldiers on the Falklands and they didn't have that many and they eventually went home. And there were these white enamel baths lying about. So the engineer came to me and he said, "I've had a good idea. If we can cut a hole through this bulkhead, we can squeeze a bath in there, we could have a proper bath, it would be great". He said, "I can plumb it up, we can manage that". But of course, we had to get permission. And any rate, the only person who could give permission was the naval officer in charge in the Falklands, a chap named Cobbold. And he came down and had a look. He said "well, it's not a bad idea, but I must tell you that that's a luxury, you lose your hard-line money". If you compare it with what happens today, it's ludicrous really, isn't it?

Chris Lee : So what happened in the end? No bath?

George James : No bath. We soon told him where to put it. The average sailor is not much interested in the niceties of things if it affects the money in his pocket, you know. But, that's the Lemaire Channel again there, look, that's a nice shot.

Chris Lee : You mentioned that you had huskies on board from time to time?

George James : Yes, oddly enough I've just got one [photo] of the dogs in my hand, it's a little Alsatian puppy.

Chris Lee : What was he doing there?

George James : We had him there as a pet.

Chris Lee : What was his name?

George James : Billy, that one was.

Chris Lee : He was the ship's dog?

George James : Yes.

Chris Lee : What happened to him in the end?

George James : I don't know, I'd left by the time. But that's me holding him, as you can see.

Chris Lee : Do you know where Billy came from?

George James : No, no. No I don't actually. There's another one of Captain Marchesi, you can just see his head popping over the top there.

Chris Lee : So, tell me about the huskies then, George.

George James : Well, we only had some in passage down to the bases, most of them were, the Eagle took some down and the Trepassey took some down later on. Bbut there were quite, they could be quite fierce. I'm not quite sure, one of the army officers who looked after them and he could handle them, he was used to them. They used to scare me stiff, I don't know. But I mean he knew exactly what he was doing with them and they were alright. But when we were at Deception, as I say, I do remember, I can almost hear it now, the way they used to howl. And of course, everything else around was so quiet that you noticed it, particularly then.

Talking about quietness, I noticed that at Port Lockroy once. I had half an hour of just [indistinct] if you like and it was amazing the feeling of quietness that there was about the place, I mean there was nothing going on. I mean, it was most impressive to me that you could be in a place where it was almost like the edge of beyond, if you like. I knew that it wasn't, but nevertheless, just up in front of you is very, very little and it's an amazing feeling. The whole place – you must have experienced it yourself

- the whole place is overpowering in some senses. And that's what I used to feel about the Antarctic, was that it's something bigger than us, if you like.

Chris Lee : Were you kind of reminded of that every day, or did you sometimes take it for granted?

George James : Most days I was aware of it, but, as I say, my job was such a minor job to what the men were actually doing on the base and what the scientists were doing that I used to feel quite in awe of them sometimes.

Chris Lee : Did you ever feel threatened by the Antarctic? Were there awkward times?

George James : No, I never felt threatened. We did have some awkward times. I don't think Captain Marchesi would remember, but we did have one instance, I think it was in the South Orkneys really, an iceberg with two peaks and it snapped in two and floated down on to us and we didn't have any steam up because of this tube, we had quite a bit of tube trouble at the time. And we ended up for a few hours with poles, at least I think it must have been the oars off the dinghy, fending ourselves off, you know. That was quite a bit scary, because you hear these stories of being so much under water and as I say we were much more under water[indistinct].

Chris Lee : Can you recall when that was?

George James : No. I tried to think about it but I can't. I can't even tell you the place, but I can see it happening and, as I say, I always remember that storm, but I think that was the worst storm in the time I was down there, when we ran out at Deception and then straight ahead into the Bransfield Strait [indistinct] and, gosh, everything happened in that three days. I've heard Captain Marchesi say that his cabin was flooded for about three days. He didn't say when or where, but I think it must have been on that occasion, because we did have some really nasty weather then. And it used to blow up so quickly in the Antarctic.

On one occasion we had a quick run to Port Lockroy, for some reason or other, and going from Deception over there, it was so quiet that we were playing darts on the mess deck and, nice and steady you know, and the water was like glass and then we weren't there many hours and on the way back it did everything but turn over, it was quite the opposite and that happened in a very short space of time then.

Chris Lee : What sort of, would you have to brace yourself, you were in the wireless room presumably?

George James : Yes, in fact I've still got a scar on my leg there, where I was sending a message one day and we hit some wave and I nearly went strolling and hit my leg against the generator, it really cut my shin.

Chris Lee : That's your left leg? So, were you having to be, were you strapped in, or braced? How did you move round and cope with the waves?

George James : Just hold on to things you know, really. As I say, all of the seamen were very good, they could manage things, they were used to the sea, you know.

Chris Lee : You were taking these huskies then, down to the bases. How would they be transported, loose on deck or what?

George James : We had boxes that were, like, they were on deck but in boxes like kennels, if you like and they were in those. I can vaguely now see one of the men, who was an Army officer, handling them. But they realised, they really needed them for the journeys from the bases, when what was our summer and their winter. They were the men who really, if you like, did the tough work, staying there for the winter, weren't they?

Chris Lee : Just summing up then, just a little bit, if we may George. How do you feel now about that period in your life? Is it a highlight of your life?

George James : It is THE highlight of my life, I would say. I only regret that I didn't, as I say, stay there and do more, because once you're back and it's all over, you can't do anything about it, you know. But when I read of other people who've gone back down again, I was in a different situation. Money wasn't all that plentiful at home, with my Mother, my Father wasn't there, and I just couldn't leave her again. And then, of course, I met Joyce and that was it, you know.

Chris Lee : So where did your career take you, in a nutshell, after that?

George James : Well, I became a commercial traveller with a builders merchants business; I've always worked for Builders Merchants, or I've always been involved with Builders Merchants. But then I was able to buy the company and Joyce's Father was a builder and he was doing a few hundred houses on one side, so we, that's how we met and of course it built up and that was my life really. And then the boys came along and I must admit I got so interested in sport, because they were so good. It's very rare that you get two of them become Internationals in a family.

Chris Lee : One was rugby, one was football.

George James : One was rugby, one was soccer, yes.

Chris Lee : For Wales?

George James : Yes. So that was rather nice and it made us a lot of friends and we, so we went on. But I think that the two highlights of my life, one was being in the Antarctic, if you like. More so that than the Falklands, although I did go back to the Falklands before I came home, and as I mentioned to you, we were starting to re-direct some of the work because not so much of the warship business, more the commercial side. And four of us were appointed, running each watch. And I had ten wireless operators in my watch and I looked forward to being on the base as a whole. And it was very busy, it was a very busy time because we had a lot of traffic go through there. Because we had some pretty, well you can see from that photograph, we had some pretty powerful transmitters then. We had nine of those, like that, you see in the one big room

Chris Lee : So, when you finally came back to Blighty, it was a building trade.

George James : Oh yes. I was a merchant, I wasn't a builder, a builder's merchant. And then ultimately I broke away, I sold a lot of shares through a company that had a barrow of stuff in Welbeck Street, and oh Gosh, it was murder, working with him, you know. So I went on for a while, till in the end I absolutely blew up. I said, "I can't do this any longer and I arranged agencies for six companies and broke away and went free-lancing and I used to cover an area from Aberystwyth to Birmingham to Portsmouth.

Chris Lee : Under your name, George James?

George James : Yes. And, of course, the nice thing about that was that I had contracts, they gave me the commission on all the business they had in an area and if we weren't there, I was still getting commission, sort of thing. But of course, the initial appointments were all set up and that was very successful because it allowed me to have a better family life, that's what I liked about it. We've always been workaholics, but nevertheless, that was good.

Chris Lee : Do you feel in any small way that your time in the Antarctic shaped your personality later in life?

George James : I don't know that it has, really. My personality's a little bit complex, I think, at times. People might say I talk a lot, but on the other hand I feel quite, what can I say, reserved, in many senses. It's very difficult. What I've been rather concerned about in doing this is that I wanted to do justice to what's there, but I can only talk about the experiences that I had whilst I was down there. What I do wish I'd been a deck officer then, if you like. One of the problems was, is that you're inside a lot, as you know and if I'd been a deck officer, you were up there and you were in with the decisions and where you went and what you did and all the rest of it. And I think that might have been better if I'd ever had the opportunity. I didn't have it, as it happened, but it would have been better to have been doing that.

Chris Lee : You mentioned you had lunch with Captain Marchesi quite recently. Have you met any of the others?

George James : No. It was a real joy to meet him, it really was. I don't know if he'd think the same about meeting me, but I thought it was marvellous. No, I've not met any of the others. I don't know why. But I often read Seafax and there's these, service pearls, I think they call it. I don't know if you've ever seen it on there. And I've looked at them regularly to see if there's ever any get-togethers, but I'd never instigate it and nobody else has. But of course, there weren't that many of us, if you stop and think about it, because half the crew were Falkland Islanders anyway, and there's no way of getting in touch with them. So that, really, there's been no opportunity to do that.

Chris Lee : Looking back on it then, George, do you think Operation Tabarin, in the light of. Looking back on it, do you think Operation Tabarin was an important thing to do, or was it? Because there was never any threat, was it?

George James : Well, I think myself that it was necessary to be there, because I think that they possibly had known more about the Argentine approach to things than anybody like me would know and so I think that creating a presence was worthwhile and of course I don't have enough knowledge to say what the scientific efforts had been, but I imagine they found lots of things that they didn't know existed before. I mean the Falklands have gone on, haven't they, they've got oil and all the rest of it now.

At that time the islands themselves were almost, if you like, an embarrassment. It's a different story now. I think that it was something worth doing, although perhaps a lot of people might disagree with that, but I think that creating a presence was worthwhile because it was all part of officially being able to claim it as ours later on. So I think it, bearing that in mind, it was a good thing. I only wish I knew more that I could talk.

Chris Lee : It's been great, George, thank you very much indeed. Is there anything else that you wanted to bring up which we haven't. Is there anything else here that you wanted to mention?

George James : No, I was telling you about that chap Hatfield. He wanted to get in touch with somebody. That's a thing he did of Port Lockroy, just after it was built in 1944.

Chris Lee : A drawing in 1944.

George James : Yes.

Chris Lee : Of the building at Port Lockroy and also all the supplies store.

George James : Yes. It's there if you want it. It might be of no interest to you, I don't know.

Chris Lee : Thank you. It's a copy isn't it?

George James : Yes. Well, that's the original. [indistinct]

Chris Lee : Who drew it?

George James : Richard Hatfield, his name was.

Chris Lee : Hatfield?

George James. Yes. There's a photograph of the crew there somewhere. That's him there, he's living in South Africa now. Yes, this chap here, that's Richard.

Chris Lee : Thank you. Thank you very much.