

PETER WITTY

Edited transcript of a recording of Peter Witty interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on 20th November 2011. BAS Archives AD6/24/1/152. Transcribed by Andy Smith, 24th October 2013.

[Part 1 0:00:00] Lee: This is Pete Anderson Witty, recorded by Chris Eldon Lee on the 20th of November 2011. Pete Anderson Witty, Part One.

Witty: My name originally was Peter Witty. When we got married, we joined my wife's name to my name because she didn't want to lose her scientific name, so we became Anderson-Witty in 1981 when we got married. I was born in Leeds in 8th of the 10th, '40.

[Part 1 0:00:35] Lee: So you are now seventy ... ?

Witty: 71, coming up to it, yes. I was always quizzed at my interview with BAS 'Don't you think you are a bit old for the job?'

[Part 1 0:00:53] Lee: You were 35 when you went South?

Witty: I was 35, yes.

[Part 1 0:00:56] Lee: And what was your response?

Witty: Oh I said 'I think you are as old as you feel, and I have always got on with younger people', and it proved the case. I enjoyed the life immensely and age was no barrier down there because I was still very fit in those days. So it was no problem and of course it came back to haunt Eric Salmon when, three times he asked me in the interview if I thought I was a bit too old for the job, and he joined the ship in Jacksonville and on the way down through the Caribbean he was puffing his way up onto the monkey island. I stood aside to let him come up and I just said to him, 'Don't you think you are a bit old for the job, Eric?' and he said 'I will never live this down.'

[Part 1 0:01:50] Lee: Just leaping forward slightly, because I will go back to the early days in a moment, the fact that you were a slightly older Fid, did that give you any kind of sense of special position in society, like the 'Father of the House' or not exactly King Fid but ...?

Witty: Not really, but people were always very interested in my background, because a lot of them had come straight from university, and of course I had been at sea for a number of years. I served my apprenticeship building aircraft. I had worked in the copper mines in Australia for seven years before joining BAS. So obviously a lot of people were in ... used to listen quite spell-bound about stories of the Australian outback and things like that and travels into the Far East when I was at sea. So yes, I think maybe it was slightly a father figure rather than someone who had 'been there, done it and walked away'.

[Part 1 0:03:00] Lee: So did the younger Fids ever come to you for advice, guidance, what we would now call counselling?

Witty: Counselling? Not really. At Signy Island I never met anybody who had any troubles at all, but at Halley Bay quite often we used to talk one to one if people were having slight problems. Then of course when I became base commander at Halley Bay there was one or two people down there ... One chap [REDACTED] [REDACTED] his wife was not communicating with him anymore, which was leading towards a very tricky situation actually. Somebody becoming very withdrawn and I had to send coded messages back to the UK, to Carys Williams, and get her to find out what was happening in the UK and just try and get him some contact back again with his wife, to stop him slipping into a real depression. So yes you were ... I mean that is the job of a base commander anyway, to make sure that everybody gets on pretty well together.

[Part 1 0:04:31] Lee: So, without prying, BAS had a kind of system, or there were facilities in place for relationship management, shall we say?

Witty: Yes. Establishments, I have mentioned Carys Williams, she was very very good.

[Part 1 0:04:47] Lee: What was her job?

Witty: She was ... Eric Salmon (he was the Personnel Officer), she worked for him.

[Part 1 0:04:57] Lee: Would she, in an instance like that, have rung up a wife and said 'Is there a problem?'?

Witty: Yes, oh yes. This person was getting very worried because he hadn't heard from her and could she shed any light on why he wasn't receiving telexes, the monthly telex and so on? And it was the obvious case of: he was out of the way and she was not behaving herself. So Carys said 'If possible, could you just put a few words down, without alarming him as to what's going on? You can probably sort all this out when he gets home. It is having a marked effect on his performance and attitude on base.'? And things did start dribbling through but he was never fully convinced that he was going to come back to the situation that he left.

[Part 1 0:06:01] Lee: So the line that was being drawn in BAS at that time was the welfare of the Fid down South? They weren't a marriage guidance ... ?

Witty: No, no, not at all. They were just worried that something serious could happen. If one person does go off the rails, it has got far-reaching effects on the whole base really.

[Part 1 0:06:28] Lee: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Witty: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[Part 1 0:08:11] Lee: [REDACTED]

Witty: [REDACTED]

[Part 1 0:08:58] Lee: And again, because you were a man of more years' experience than most, would the base commander Ken Lax at that time, would that have been something you would have talked about together? How to deal with this?

Witty: Yes, because Ken had quite an affinity with ... I mean the support staff were usually the older members of the base. We had Mike Houlcroft, myself, and Ken used to come into the workshop and we would talk about these things sometimes. He would explain his position and try and work something out satisfactorily. I mean it was very difficult for Ken. Here we are, a very happy band, and yet it was a very very difficult year for him because there was a small percentage on the base who became an offshoot of the base. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] But the ones who were there, and carried on round the base and carried about their normal duties, we had a fantastic year. We all worked extremely hard. In fact we had to work a damned sight harder because the doctor had an accident; so he took up quite a bit of time because people used to look after him; [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] we had to sort of compensate for them in our daily routines: fuel runs, food runs and stuff like that.

[Part 1 0:10:57] Lee: So it wasn't a division that took place in the base, then, between the majority and a small minority? It was the majority and then some rather odd individuals, circumstances ...?

Witty: Yes.

[Part 1 0:11:05] Lee: I mean the doctor's case was physical?

Witty: Yes, oh yes.

¹ Possibly John Bradford, a fellow winterer.

[Part 1 0:11:08] Lee: So there wasn't a divide there?

Witty: No, no. Not at all, no. Everybody kept talking to everybody else, and jollying people along which is what you have got to do. And the Antarctic is probably one of the best places for someone who is feeling slightly depressed or for joking and joshing people along too. Get them out of it and things like that. In Halley Bay there were two tables in the dining room (you have probably heard this already, haven't you?) and we were called 'Animals' Corner'. It was all the mechanics, the electrician, the carpenter. Then the next table was what we called 'Pseuds' Corner' which were the scientists, radio operator and people like that, and it was a great effort for pseuds to try and get on to Animals' Corner, because it was just an absolute riot over there every mealtime. There was so much hilarity, and everybody loved it actually. It was a nice set-up. There was no divide; it was just bouncing one off the other.

[Part 1 0:12:44] Lee: Why did you end up going South? What happened to make you want to go to the Antarctic?

Witty: I suppose this is the plum question you ask everyone. 1948: *Scott of the Antarctic*, John Mills, James Robertson Justice, etc. Small boy in Leeds, my father took me to see it at the Odeon in Leeds, and I thought this was absolutely amazing. Then later on I started picking the odd book up of the Antarctic and Shackleton especially. So I always had a hankering to go. I did write once to Salvesens before I started my apprenticeship, to see if I could get onto the whaling ships, but it was at a time when they were just about coming to the end of the whaling days. And when I was in Australia I wrote to ANARE and was actually asked to come down for an interview, to Melbourne. But unfortunately, in the week between me appearing for my interview, the position had been filled.

[Part 1 0:13:58] Lee: Did you do the interview then?

Witty: Yes, oh yes, but they did apologise, to say that unfortunately the position had been filled, and they paid me of course for going down for the interview.

[Part 1 0:14:09] Lee: I will come back to that in a moment. What was it about *Scott of the Antarctic* which was attractive, because they all ended up dead, didn't they, rumour has it?

Witty: Yes, but I think it was filmed in Greenland² and I thought the scenery was absolutely magnificent.

[Part 1 0:14:25] Lee: The scenery was filmed in the Antarctic, largely.

Witty: Some of it yes. But some of the filming ... Later on in life I actually used the sledges that they used in the film, when I worked for Cambridge Spitsbergen. The sledges had been lent by Brian Harland³, the film maker. But no, I just thought that it was a very heroic sort of thing and of course at that age you are very impressionable. I thought that it was something I would like to do, I mean not to go and perish on the

² According to *Wikipedia*, it was filmed in the Antarctic (Hope Bay), in Norway and in Switzerland.

³ W.B. Harland, distinguished Cambridge University geologist.

ice cap but to see those sights: the ship pushing through the ice floes. That was probably one of the main things that impacted on me.

[Part 1 0:15:20] Lee: So how did you apply to BAS? Did you see an advert or did you ...?

Witty: It was very funny; my mum applied to BAS for me. No she didn't. When I came back from Australia because my father had died, I stayed around for a while to see how Mum would cope with being without my father, and I saw an advert for the British Antarctic Survey in the paper. I was doing a dead-end job as a workshop supervisor. I had had a particularly bad day two or three weeks after I had seen this advert. I said to my mum 'I wish I had written off to apply for the British Antarctic Survey.' So she said 'Why don't you phone them up?' I phoned Directory Enquires and I thought it was in London. Of course the operator said 'There's no British Antarctic Survey in London.' That was it. I said 'Oh they are not there. I can't remember.' I went to work; my mother phoned me up and she said 'I have just spoken to a very nice lady in the *Daily Mail* and it is in Cambridge, and she gave me the address and phone number.'

[Part 1 0:16:32] Witty: So I phoned up and they were wanting tractor mechanics, which was after working in the copper mines for seven years ..., all the vehicles were tracked vehicles, very heavy mining machinery. So I thought 'I might be in with a chance.' So I phoned them up and they sent me an application form. I filled it in and sent it back the following day and a lovely lady called Margaret Clark, she phoned me up and she said 'I am very sorry, the job as tractor mechanic has been taken', but would I apply for a job as a diesel electrical mechanic? So I said 'Yes, I would.' She said 'Well, can you come down tomorrow?' Because obviously some people had either dropped out or been deemed unsuitable at a later point. So I was a very late recruit and I was sent to London straight after my interview for a medical and then back to Cambridge and then they said 'Can you come down next week for the Conference?' Then of course two weeks after that I was on the ship down South.

[Part 1 0:17:44] Lee: Can you recall the interviews, the Australian interview and the FIDS interview? Were they identical?

Witty: They were not comparable at all.

[Part 1 0:17:52] Lee: In what way? Why not?

Witty: Well for a start the Australians were interviewing me out of good faith because the position had been taken. It was very casual, laid back. They just wanted to know my brief history and so forth.

[Part 1 0:18:07] Lee: For future reference?

Witty: Yes. If I wanted to apply again at some time, they would take it into consideration. But then going to the BAS interview was totally different and I never ... It was probably 14 years since I had ever undergone an interview, except for going in the Merchant Navy. To be confronted by Bill Sloman, who was a very military person, a little moustache and so forth, Eric Salmon, Jim Conroy who was an ex-

birdey man from Signy Island and Dad Etchells who was going to be my boss. They asked the usual questions, you know. 'Why do you want to go to the Antarctic?' and so forth. They knew all my details, and I always thought that Dad Etchells never really asked me many questions about mechanical things. It turned out later on that he lived just over the hill from me. He lived in Whaley Bridge when I lived in Poynton in Cheshire, and of course he knew all the places where I served my apprenticeship and so forth, so he reckoned it must have been pretty reasonable anyway. But Eric Salmon kept saying 'Don't you think you are a bit old for the job?' Bill Sloman, in very military fashion asked me about why I thought Scott had failed and so forth. They seemed quite satisfied with my answers and I was accepted.

[Part 1 0:19:44] Lee: Were they psyching you out, in retrospect?

Witty: No, I don't think so.

[Part 1 0:19:49] Lee: Were the Australians psyching you out?

Witty: I think the Australians were slightly, yes.

[Part 1 0:19:53] Lee: Did you do any tests, any psychological tests with the Australians?

Witty: No, not much there. When I later became base commander and sat on interview panels later on, they were very informal, and if you had been down South a few times you almost knew as soon as the candidate came through the door whether this was a suitable person. And support staff, the base commanders used to sort through the applications and try and read into qualifications and past experience, whether these people were suitable or not. Then when they were called for interview, almost as soon as the bloke came through the door you could say 'This is a bloke I wouldn't mind wintering with.' And it was pretty accurate.

[Part 1 0:20:52] Lee: Except of course in one or two instances which were unusual ??? [inaudible] this sort of thing. You seemed to hit two or three of them.

Witty: Yes, but you don't know who was on the interview panel for these people either. But one of the ... If I could just put a little anecdote in, we were advertising for builders for Bird Island, because they were putting a new extension up on Bird Island. The BAS application form was obviously two sheets of A4, hinged in the middle, your personal details on the front, your academic details on the second page, experience of the third page and then you turned it over and there was just a one-line question on the back 'How did you hear about the British Antarctic Survey?' There was usually a one-line answer: either *New Scientist*, *Climber and Rambler*, or the daily press. I turned this one over and there was an essay on the back of this application form, and it said 'We were working on a block of flats and we got rained off so we went to a cafe across the road. I ordered sausage, egg and chips. The sausage shot off the plate and landed on your advert. I thought it was an omen.' [laughter] So how could you not bring someone like that in for an interview. He came for an interview and he was very very good and he had two or maybe three consecutive seasons down there.

[Part 1 0:22:32] Lee: Before we move on to your particular experiences down South, I just need to know where the nickname came from, Gladys.

Witty: Gladys, that was a hat. It was a woolly hat which continued to grow. I would keep tucking the ends up and then it would drop down again.

[Part 1 0:22:50] Lee: It stretched?

Witty: Yes, it stretched so you ended up with about six strands of wool over the top and Mike Davies always nicknamed it my Gladys hat.

[Part 1 0:22:57] Lee: All right. So you went first of all down to Signy in '75.

Witty: Yes, yes.

[Part 1 0:23:03] Lee: And a very interesting challenge having to install some Rolls Royce generators.

Witty: Three Rolls Royce C-range generators.

[Part 1 0:23:11] Lee: Did that stretch you?

Witty: No, not really, no. It was ... The first thing you learned about the British Antarctic Survey was that improvisation was one of the main things that you were expected to do, because they can't provide equipment and machinery for every single job that goes on down there or spares. So a man who is quite adept with his hands is a godsend. He can manufacture stuff; he can make things. Getting three generators into the generator shed with all the manpower that you can summon at the time. Fid-power is always very effective. That was no problem and we had a good electrician down there who did ... He had already been there the previous season so he had got all the electrical cables run and everything. But they did make one glaring mistake, was that the main programme at Signy was diving, marine biology was diving, and they had converted the base from three-phase to single-phase and they hadn't ordered an electric motor for the diving compressor.

[Part 1 0:24:38] Witty: The last call of the ship had gone and they said that if they could find one on Stanley they would send it down, either send the *Biscoe* back or something like that. That's how urgent it was. But no 10 horse-power single-phase motor was available. It would have been colossal. A single-phase ten horse-power motor is probably about so big, physically. So Ian Collinge, who was the logistics officer for the diving, said 'Is there anything down there that you can use or convert?' I scouted around and I found a Honda fire pump which was a V-twin diesel engine which I converted to run a Dunlop diving compressor, but we had to be very careful of course about picking carbon monoxide up. So the air intake was one side of the hub; the exhaust was the other side. But it did enable them to dive the rest of the season and a fair bit of the next season as well, before a single-phase engine came in for me.

[Part 1 0:23:55] Lee: This was called the Honda Lob.

Witty: The Honda Lob, yes.

[Part 1 0:25:59] Lee: And that was your initiative to do that?

Witty: Yes, and I mean when you looked at it, it just looked like a manufactured diving compressor. It worked extremely well.

[Part 1 0:26:12] Lee: The decision to go from three-phase to single-phase, were you involved in the decision making process or did that happen before you arrived?

Witty: No, that happened before I arrived. The reason why was because they had these three Rolls Royce generators that originally came out of Halley Bay when Grillage Village was closed down. They took the generators out, brought them back to the UK, had them re-conditioned. Signy wanted new generators, so they thought 'Well we have got these and we have got no great expenditure buying new. We will just use them at Signy. So it will be cheaper to convert the base to single-phase and have these generators in.

[Part 1 0:26:57] Lee: How were the Rolls Royce engines? They sound posh and expensive. Did they purr?

Witty: Rolls Royce engines weren't their best-selling feature actually. They were not running under very heavy loads down there as you can imagine. Signy was a small base and sometimes you had to induce load onto them by running things that didn't need to be run. Otherwise you ended up with glazed bores and very fluttering sounding exhausts, governors searching for fuel and so forth. No, they ran very well and I enjoyed setting up a generator shed which was sort of the apple of my eye. It was what you wanted a machine house to look like, like in the olden days pumping stations. Everything was beautifully polished. You had your spares up on the wall, your special tools. The floor was painted red, and you used to slip a pair of felt slippers on to walk round doing your daily routines.

[Part 1 0:28:03] Lee: What, in the Antarctic?

Witty: Yes, oh yes, and it was very good. The only problem we did have though was that they sent down a desalination unit which was supposed to work off the water temperature of the generators but of course we could never get the heat into the generators to run the desalination unit properly. So we still had to collect water off the back slope, and sort out the feathers and things that came off the snow petrels and skuas.

[Part 1 0:28:34] Lee: You lived in the Plastic Palace, didn't you?

Witty: Yes, that's right.

[Part 1 0:28:38] Lee: Give me a thumbnail sketch of life in there, in that 'palace'. I use the word loosely.

Witty: Very noisy, because of course there was very little insulation in it and it was originally built as a tropical telephone exchange. I don't know if you knew that. But

'Fuchsy'⁴ bought three of them. They were advertised in the paper somewhere, and Sir Vivian was never one to miss a bargain. He thought if they were good enough to work in the tropics, they would be good enough to work in the Antarctic. One went to Adelaide Island, one to Deception Island and one to Signy, and one of the main things was that the sheathbills loved the mastic in the joints, so they used to pick that out. So you used to have to get up on the roof and re-mastic the roof every so often to stop the ingress of water. There was very little in the way of insulation, so they were quite cold, and noise was a ... I mean I am not talking about riotous noise or anything like that, but people walking about of course, you could hear it anywhere in the base, and there was such a lovely hut next door, Tonsberg House, which had been built in the old traditional way of wood with double diagonal planking with insulation in between the planking and it always felt warm even though it was barely heated. And you went into the plastic hut and of course everybody had to have Dimplex heaters on everywhere to try and keep the place reasonably warm.

[Part 1 0:30:23] Lee: Having supplied the means for diving, did you actually do any diving yourself?

Witty: Doug Allan taught me to dive down there, yes, which was quite an experience.

[Part 1 0:30:32] Lee: This would be called recreation, would it?

Witty: Recreational, but it was always the case of ... I was asked to take a diving medical before I went down South, which I did do. Then Dougie taught us to dive in the Cove⁵, three of us I think. It was just in case anybody was taken ill or something like that. There was always someone to stand in. Yes, we dived off Poker Point, and places like that, through the sea ice. I used to make underwater camera housings for people, out of the BAS stock of Perspex that we had. I mean they were very primitive you know, O-rings on the wind-on mechanism, and stuff like that. They did work. We didn't have many disasters of cameras getting flooded. But down to 20 feet or so they were fine.

[Part 1 0:31:28] Witty: So people with Olympuses could take them down, because there were very few Olympus (I forget now what the model was called), they were bright yellow like an Olympus Trip that could be used underwater. So people relied on me making camera housings for people. No, it was exciting to see seals underwater and to see a female coaxing the pup into the water, from underneath. To see this beautiful little pup, that looks like a lady's nightie case with all these excess folds of flesh, especially when they got underwater; they hadn't filled out completely. They are lovely to see, gliding about and following the trails of bubbles and things. Also the plant life that was down there in sheltered places that hadn't been scraped by bergy bits and things, down anywhere where there was a bit of overhang. It was almost tropical, soft corals and things like that, little stars and all sorts of wildlife in the little underhangs. Very nice, very picturesque.

[Part 1 0:32:51] Lee: You built a railway, of sorts?

⁴ Sir Vivian Fuchs.

⁵ Factory Cove.

Witty: Oh, the Signy Light Railway?

[Part 1 0:32:57] Lee: Is it the southernmost railway in the world?

Witty: Well it wasn't really a railway; it was a means of getting fuel drums up to an emergency fuel dump behind the base. When I got there, they were just completing it. They had to tunnel into the hillside to go under the fuel pipe that came from the 200-ton fuel tank. Then they made a platform to store the fuel on and they had got an old winch from the whaling days. They used to crank this winch up and it used to take something like 25 minutes to haul one drum of fuel up to the top, and then of course someone had to pull this winch out, all the way back down to the bottom again. I think there was 100-odd drums of fuel to be winched up. So I asked Dave Fletcher, who was the base commander, I said 'Would you mind if I motorised it for you?' I was sick and tired of hearing people huffing and puffing about this damn winch winching up these drums of fuel. So I made a framework up and cut one of the handles off the winch and made an adaptor off a skidoo engine. And we could get a drum up to the top in something like a minute and a half, from the beach up to this depot. We were just ripping through them in no time at all. By smoko we had got half the stuff shifted.

[Part 1 0:34:29] Lee: So there were rails, were there? ??? [inaudible]

Witty: Yes, they were left behind by the whalers. Yes, a steep incline.

[Part 1 0:34:35] Lee: OK and the skidoo was actually a stationary engine producing power?

Witty: Yes, fastened to the winch. I took the other winch handle off so it didn't clout anybody. And we had a little trolley that had been left behind by the whalers which we boarded out and mounted the fuel drums onto to come up to the top.

[Part 1 0:34:57] Lee: What happened to it in the end?

Witty: I don't know. It stayed there for a season but of course the emergency fuel was only brought in about once every five years. Because of the deterioration of the drums, they had to change them over. Because we didn't use much petrol at all down there except in chain-saws for cutting through the sea ice, and the skidoos and things in the winter, and for the outboard engines on the boats.

[Part 1 0:35:30] Lee: There's that famous film called *London to Brighton in Four Minutes*.

Witty: Oh yes, on the train.

[Part 1 0:35:35] Lee: Yes. I gather you tried to re-create that.

Witty: [laughs] Wynn-Williams did. Unfortunately poor old Wyn got killed but not down in the Antarctic. He thought it would be so good to have this movie camera running as he was brought up the slope and then dropped back down again, and the cook was put in charge of operating the winch. Then after showing them what to do, I

just let them get on with it. Anyway they unloaded the fuel drum. Wynn-Williams got on it again to go down the hill, under the fuel line and down to the beach. The cook suddenly thought 'He's going a bit fast.' and instead of just lowering the brake slowly, the band brake on the winch, he just let it go and of course this thing stopped dead. The elasticity of the rope stretched for a bit and then Wynn-Williams was catapulted off this trolley but he still had the film running. When he got it back at the relief, it was so funny to see the sky, the hut, the sky, the hut... No it was an amusing thing to do.

[Part 1 0:36:57] Lee: You were moved on from Signy to South Georgia for a summer. Was that just a jolly or was it for some serious purpose?

Witty: No, I was sent up there to join the ship to go down to Halley but the ship had an altered itinerary. So I spent quite a long time up there and of course the sea ice was bad that year as well, so they were in no hurry to pick me up to go down to Halley. So I had quite a long time on South Georgia and I spent my time repairing and painting the cemetery fence, where Shackleton's grave was, and things like that.

[Part 1 0:37:37] Lee: Right. Tell me about Shackleton's grave. Was it a special place?

Witty: Oh yes, very much so.

[Part 1 0:37:44] Lee: Why was that?

Witty: The unusual thing was that Shackleton is held by a lot of the European countries like Poland and Estonia and Russia, as one of the great heroes, and nearly all the tributes, beautiful tributes made out of bronze and so forth, are mostly from Eastern Bloc countries, which always surprised me. There was only one plaque, that was kept in the base commander's office, from the British Government.

[Part 1 0:38:24] Lee: So how did these tributes ...? What did they look like?

Witty: Well they were beautiful bronze sculptures of flowers and wreaths and things like that, made in bronze.

[Part 1 0:38:35] Lee: And just placed around the grave?

Witty: Mmm. Yes.

[Part 1 0:38:38] Lee: And that means a cross⁶?

Witty: No, a stone, a big piece of stone, with a verse of Browning on the reverse side of it, and also the letters used to fall out of the headstone. They were lead, inset into the stone and I used to look round and find them and Araldite them back into the stone. And it was a good job I did because that summer Lord Shackleton came down and it was the first time he had ever visited his father's grave.

[Part 1 0:39:12] Lee: So you were sprucing it up for that purpose were you?

⁶ There is a cross on the other side of the cove.

Witty: Yes, and it was a very touching ceremony actually, because he came down on the *Endurance*, and the captain and some of the officers came ashore and he had his secretary with him and things like that.

[Part 1 0:39:30] Lee: What more do you remember about that? Can you flesh out that little description for me, the ceremonial of that visit?

Witty: Well there was no what you would call a religious ceremony. It was just a moving tribute for him to see him kneel down at his father's grave, which, no matter who you are, I think is a bit special, yes.

[Part 1 0:39:54] Lee: He wasn't a young man then was he?

Witty: No he wasn't. I think he must have been in his sixties. He was very grey-haired. I don't know how old he was⁷. It was chaotic of course because after we got this graveyard absolutely spotless and straightened some of the whalers graves there crosses up, one of the scientists had been over to check on one of his experiments that morning said 'There's two bloody great ellie seals in the cemetery.' Of course they had just barged straight through the board fences. We had to go over, shoo them out and re-do all the fences again before they came ashore from the *Endurance*.

[Part 1 0:40:43] Lee: Shackleton might have smiled, mightn't he?

Witty: I think he would have had a smile yes.

[Part 1 0:40:47] Lee: Did you know that you were going to do more than one year when you signed up? Did you know were going to go south to Halley for a second year?

Witty: No. I was going to be at Signy for two and a half.

[Part 1 0:40:57] Lee: What happened?

Witty: But I really wanted to get into a travelling base, the real Antarctic, and I asked, requested from Eric Salmon if I could be transferred to Halley, and he said 'Yes, no problem at all.' because my major work was finished at Signy anyway. It was just daily routines I was doing: check the oil and water like you do your car, and manufactured stuff for scientists. I really wanted to see it because people talked about it. We had a chippy at Signy Island who had been down at Halley⁸ and he told me all about it. So Eric said 'Yes, go ahead. Go to South Georgia, pick the ship up there, then go down to Halley.' But we didn't know when we got there what a state the place was in.

[Part 1 0:42:00] Lee: Well it hadn't been relieved for two years?

⁷ He was 65.

⁸ Don Mackay.

Witty: They had done the relief but the year before, whilst I was at Signy, they had had a very poor relief. It was a 40-mile relief from the Low Shelf, and they hadn't got a great deal of fuel in, obviously, because of the distance travelled. The previous year they had lost a complete fuel dump, so it was dependent on putting 2000 drums of fuel ashore that year to ensure them for two years anyway. Otherwise the base was going to be closed down. If it was a bad relief, they were going to close Halley for a year I think. So we got down there and we had two Sno-cats on board, which were an automatic and a manual, and they proved to be perfect, and it was a good job they did because the vehicles that were on the base were absolutely rubbish; they had broken down.

[Part 1 0:43:10] Witty: So after the relief, I was standing with Dad Etchells at the top of the garage ramp and he said to me 'There is an awful lot of work to do here.' I said 'Yes.' because the generators were urgently needing an overhaul. They were in very bad condition. All the machinery was defunct, virtually, and I had to go out in the field for 16 weeks with Ken Lax to put in an experiment up on the inland ice. So I set to. Dad Etchells said to me 'Would you like another mechanic?' So I said 'Yes, that would be good.' He said 'There are three summer-only tractor mechanics on the ship.' He said there is this chap from the Army, who I didn't like very much. I had seen him on the way down from South Georgia to Halley and I thought he was a bit over the top.

[Part 1 0:44:24] Witty: There was an Irish chap who shared the same cabin as me and when I asked him if he had got any reading matter, he handed me a Skefko bearing catalogue, [laughter] which was not what you would expect for night-time reading, and Mike Davies who I didn't know. He drove in the daytime whilst I drove on nights. So we only very briefly saw each other. I don't think we had had hardly any conversation whatsoever. So I said to Dad Etchells 'What's his background?' He said 'Oh it was Agricultural Engineering, Cambridge. He seems OK.' I thought 'Well I will try him.' He was fast asleep. I knocked on his cabin door and I said to him 'Do you want to winter?' This classic phrase came out: 'Hang on a minute, buster.' He put his glasses on. He said 'Give me five minutes.' He came out and he said yes. So this is the start to a tremendous friendship of thirty-odd years.

[Part 1 0:45:34] Lee: Well you both made that note independently in your written submissions, you both said that so it must have been important to you.

Witty: Yes.

[Part 1 0:45:42] Lee: I just wonder how it blossomed?

Witty: It was very strange. I said I had to rebuild these generators before I went out in the field. I started work at about 11 o'clock at night because of the usual after-relief period of getting everything stored away, unpacking spares and so forth. I found all the spares that were needed for the two generators: cylinder heads, valves, and stuff like that, that had to be done, new liners, pistons. I started work at 11 o'clock at night and I was aware that the generator shed door had opened and there was Mike standing there. He said 'Do you want a hand?' So I said 'Yes, I would love one.' you see, and it's a mechanic's thing. If you just watch how someone's working, you know that they know exactly what they are doing. So we both worked on either side of this engine,

we got it stripped down. We got it turned over, the crank out, bearings, pistons, liners, gaskets on, head on, all the valves done in the heads and everything by about 6 o'clock the following morning. We worked very hard, working with new components all the time anyway, and we had it up and running and that was how it started.

[Part 1 0:47:09] Witty: We were almost telepathic about what we did, and that has happened later on in life. We both ... I came back from the Antarctic; I said to Eric 'When can I go back again?' and he said 'Go on, have a holiday first, and see how you feel.' I went over to the TT races for a week, saw my mum for a few days and I was absolutely bored to tears. And your friends are very shallow compared with what you have experienced down there. 'I can't go out tonight. My girlfriend won't let me.' and stuff like that. So I phoned up BAS and said 'Can I come back? Is there something to do?' Dad Etchells said. 'Yeah!' he said, 'in fact Honk is just starting back on Monday.'

[Part 1 0:47:59] Witty: So we both started back on exactly the same day. He was the same, bored to tears, and then we both bought Jaguar cars. He bought one; I didn't know he'd bought one, and I bought one off my brother, and we both arrived back at BAS the same day, we had both got XJ6's. Then I used to go back and see my mum quite often and I said 'I am going to buy a silly hat for when the Russians come. We can trade it for some good gear with the Russians: nice leather boots and furry hats.' So he said 'Yes, I will do the same.' He came back on the Monday morning. I said 'Did you buy a hat?' He said 'Yes.' I said 'Go and put it on and I will put mine on.' We both came out and we had both bought deerstalkers. That's how we have gone on through life: we both think pretty much the same.

[Part 1 0:48:59] Lee: Has it always been 'unsignificant' thinking, or have there been moments when it had been quite important?

Witty: Um, I don't know. It is one of these things, that I would trust Mike with my life, without any hesitation whatsoever, and I would probably think he would say the same, because we did some pretty dangerous things: prior to the relief of the ship, the ramp to the sea ice. There was usually a great big curl of ice, you know, a wind scoop underneath it and you never knew how deep, how thick the ice was because of the amount of snow that was sitting on the top of it. But we used to have to take two bulldozers down and make an accessible entry to the ice shelf from the sea ice. We had these two vehicles coupled together over a 20-30 foot drop, pushing snow down and stuff caving in and what have you. You have got to know exactly what the other one is doing, and we have always worked well together.

[Part 1 0:50:17] Lee: We are leaping about a bit, which is absolutely fine, but I must ask you about the famous accident.

Witty: Through the sea ice? Paul?

[Part 1 0:50:28] Lee: Well yes I am. Tell me the story of what happened, because this was a machine that had been modified earlier in the season.

Witty: It had been overhauled, not modified.

[Part 1 0:50:40] Lee: The cab had been taken off?

Witty: The cab had been taken off, yes, just prior to the relief, because someone caught it on the side of the garage ramp when they were dozing and damaged it quite badly. But we decided that because it was going out anyway, we would take the cab off, and they were the last two vehicles to go back to the ship before the ship cleared off. It was quite a long relief that year. I think it was about 17 miles or something, 7 miles across the sea ice⁹, and by the time you got down to Mobster Creek and back out onto the sea ice, I think it was about 17 miles or something like that. Alan Etchells (my boss) was driving the Muskeg tractor with a crane on it, and we were following exactly the same route that we had done the relief on. It was a stake line because there was so much hummocked ice. Mike and I had put the route in originally from the ship through to the base, and driving along, lots of spindrift blowing about. It was pretty grey, overcast and visibility was very bad.

[Part 1 0:52:09] Witty: You couldn't see the ship from where we were on the sea ice, and all of a sudden I was driving along and water was coming up the bonnet and two great wings of ice, like a butterfly coming up either side of me, and it just went through. And of course I went down with it because for some reason I couldn't get off it, and I went down a fair way because when I looked up, the hole was probably, looked about 12 inches diameter from the depth I was at. Probably about the size of that light when I was looking up. I got free and was coming up to the surface but the ice was all slotting back into place then so you just had a tracery of lines through the hole. But I managed to get to where I could see more daylight and forced my arms through it and then got my back against the ice and push a bit and then get a bit more room so I could eventually get ... I mean trying to get your arms up a metre out of the water is pretty difficult, especially when you are in waterlogged clothing.

[Part 1 0:53:35] Witty: I managed to get my hands on the ice and pull my head out and get some air and then pull myself a bit further. I looked across and Dad Etchells was just kneeling down alongside the hole looking very distressed, and the ice was still moving. So I shouted out to him 'Oi! I am over here.' and of course he ran round and pulled me out and he said 'Are you all right? Are you all right?' He had tears running down his face. I put my hand in my pocket and I said 'Bloody hell, my fags are wet!' He said 'Will you behave yourself?' We decided we would talk over the situation because it was apparent then that a large tide crack had opened up, but because of the amount of spindrift that was blowing you just could not see the tide crack at all and that's what had happened. Luckily I had put my skis on the running boards of the Muskeg tractor. You can't put them anywhere on a crawler tractor because there is nothing there to stand them on, and I tried to get down the side of the engine in the engine bay of the Muskeg tractor to warm up a bit but there was no chance of getting in there. I was starting to feel a bit cold then so I said 'I will stick my skis on and I will ski to the ship. At least I will keep moving.' I had probed quite a bit around this area and there was no way that we could get the Muskeg across safely anyway. So Dad stayed with the Muskeg tractor and I started skiing towards the ship.

[Part 1 0:55:21] Lee: On your own?

⁹ He probably means the shelf ice.

Witty: Yes. By this time I was a bit like Tinker Bell. the water was running down and freezing on everything and I got to within about three miles of the ship I think when there was a brief lull in the spindrift. Stuart Lawrence was on the wing of the bridge and he saw me on skis. He was a bit worried. We didn't carry radios in those days. He sent Ken Lax then to come and see what the matter was and Ken saw me covered in ice. I couldn't get my skis off, couldn't get the bindings off so we had to break them off with a wheel brace out of the vehicle. We got into the cab and I just walked up the gangway onto the ship and by this time the buzz had got round: 'Pete has gone through the sea ice.' We just went up to the chief engineer's cabin which had probably the best shower facilities on the ship and Alan stayed with me in case I flaked out or something like that. I stood under the shower, fully clothed, for 5 or 10 minutes until I could actually start to get my clothing off.

[Part 1 0:56:53] Witty: Alan was sitting in his chair and he said 'What on earth has happened to your boot?' I had RBLTs on (rubber-bottomed leather-topped boots) and at the heel they are three layers of leather thick; at the calf they are two layers of leather, at the heel they are three, and it was cut like a knife, straight down the back, and this was what obviously held me onto the IH as it went through. There was one in the hold, which I sat on the following day. I sat in the same position as if I had been driving it and there was a seat adjuster. It was a piece of U-channel with quite sharp edges on, which had caught in the back of my boot. I don't ever remember panicking or anything, and how I freed my boot from that ... But anyway, no long term effects, no flashbacks. It was just a nice story to be able to tell, that you survived.

[Part 1 0:58:00] Lee: International Harvesters of course normally have cabs?

Witty: Yes.

[Part 1 0:58:04] Lee: And a decision was taken by you and Michael Davies to remove it?

Witty: Yes, to take it off.

[Part 1 0:58:10] Lee: Now, looking back at that, and assuming there might be some sort of Superior Creative Force in the world, are you making any connections here or is that ...?

Witty: No, I wouldn't say so. No.

[Part 1 0:58:21] Lee: So it was luck?

Witty: Yes, I think it was. It would have been very difficult to get out though the escape hatch on a crawler tractor. You would not have got through the side doors. There was a square hatch in the roof. They tended to freeze because of condensation and so forth. You would have had to lie on your back and kick the roof off but by that time the cab would have been full of water and I don't think you would have got out through the side doors because they were only narrow anyway. You used to have to get out sideways to get out, so no I was very lucky in that way.

[Part 1 0:59:02] Lee: You are now known as a man who went swimming at sea with a tractor.

Witty: You can't swim with 9 tons strapped to you. [laughs].

[Part 1 0:59:09] Lee: Let's just pause for a minute.

Witty: Yes.

[Part 1 0:59:11] Lee: Whilst I change the disc.

[Part 1 0:59:16] [End of Part One]

[Part 2 0:00:00] Lee: This is Pete Anderson Witty, recorded by Chris Eldon Lee on the 20th of November 2011. Pete Anderson Witty, Part Two.

[Part 2 0:00:12] Lee: That story, of your escape from the International Harvester, became a bit of a legend at BAS, didn't it?

Witty: Yes, I believe that it is used at the Conference now, on Safety in the Field and how all the vehicles have to be equipped with radios, no people to ride on sledges anymore and things like that. I did hear ... I didn't know anything about that until when we moved to Devon there was a couple who both originally worked at Signy Island. They met down there but they live in the village now, and when I was introduced to Matt, he said 'Oh you are Pete Witty? You are a legend! You are always mentioned at the Conference about going through the sea ice.' So I suppose it's a little bit of notoriety that one gets.

[Part 2 0:01:09] Lee: Was that your only close call, or was there another incident, with Mike Pinnock?

Witty: Mike Pinnock and I lost a sledge through a crevasse in quite a remote part actually. It hadn't been travelled for many many years and it was summertime and you can usually see the 'dwell' of a melting bridge. This particular time I was pulling two sledges. Mike was sitting on the second sledge and I almost realised, as soon as I had gone over it, that this was a bridge, even though it was slightly raised. There was this tremendous 'Woof!' as it went. The second sledge broke through. But I managed to keep it going and at the same time shouted to Mike who was looking round at the scenery, and he rolled off before the second sledge broke through, disappeared and the tow rope broke. Sod's Law: that had the tent on, the radio, the rescue sack. The other sledge just had the food and fuel and stuff. So Mike joined me on the far side and managed to peer over the edge when we roped ourselves to the remains of the tow ropes, actually, because we didn't have anything else.

[Part 2 0:02:54] Witty: I did a quick guesstimate and thought that if I tied the tow ropes together I could climb down because this sledge was on a ledge. I climbed down and ended up about 8 feet short of the ledge. So I thought 'Well I have only got one chance here. I don't think I will climb back up this rope. I am going to drop, and if I stand the sledge upright like a ladder I can reach the end of the rope and then send the rescue sack up first of all to Mike.' Then he sent the proper ropes down and we

hoisted everything up to the surface. Then I jumared out and then we pulled the sledge up and we immediately made camp and made a cup of tea after that. But it took about two hours I should think to retrieve it all but we were very very lucky because this ledge was minute, that it had stuck on, and it was quite a deep crevasse. The blue depths, you can never really judge the depth of what these crevasses are.

[Part 2 0:04:16] Lee: Did that change your attitude to the Antarctic at all, those two close calls?

Witty: No not at all. It didn't make you blasé by any means. I mean you were certainly more aware of the dangers but you certainly never treat the Antarctic with contempt or think you are invincible, because that it a silly attitude to take. Safety does play a very big part in your survival down there, even today with so many good mechanical aids and navigation and so forth, whereas we were just on sledging wheel and compasses, and rather a primitive form of transport: a bit better than dogs but ... You realised if a skidoo broke through. If you have got two skidoos, you can rope them together and you have got a good chance that one will hold the other, but when you have only got one skidoo, if that goes through and you are on it, you don't have much chance.

[Part 2 0:05:40] Lee: There is a story about the base doctor, Iain Levack, who had an accident. I think you were involved in trying to deal with that afterwards. What can you tell me about that?

Witty: It was hilarious, actually.

[Part 2 0:05:52] Lee: Not for him?

Witty: No.

[Part 2 0:05:56] Lee: I am willing to hear the funny side of it.

Witty: The funny side was that when it was discovered that Iain wasn't around at lunchtime, someone went down and said ... Iain had managed to crawl up the ladders out of the old base, 50-60 feet, crawl all the way across to the base, down the south shaft of the base (he didn't want to obviously come through the base because I think he was probably still in shock and the adrenalin going).

[Part 2 0:06:30] Lee: He had fallen, hadn't he?

Witty: He had done something he shouldn't have been doing – that was abseiling down the gantry rope. As the year progressed and it got colder and colder, the rope was about that fat with hoar frost. He jumped off the side of the shaft, grabbed hold of the rope and of course friction on leather gloves and hoar frost is absolutely nil, and he just plummeted to the bottom of the shaft, [REDACTED]. He managed to, like I say, drag himself out of the base and up all these ladders, across to the base where we were, down the south shaft probably to try and assess his situation himself. Anyway he didn't turn up for lunch so someone went to look for him and he said 'I am in my bunk. I have had an accident,' So of course the person came along and said 'Oh, Leeches is in his bunk. He's had an accident.'

[Part 2 0:07:41] Witty: The whole base is jammed in the dormitory corridor and we decided that the best thing to do would be to get him into the surgery so we could look at him properly, clear off most of them. So there was the chippy, myself, Mike and Steve and Ken. We started dismantling the side board off the top bunk and sent the chippy to get a door. He came rushing in with a door, we slid the mattress off the bunk on to the door, and then the door would go through the bloody doorway; it was a bigger door! So we had to put him back in the bunk again, take the door off the pit room and then take him through into the surgery and then get the X-ray machine out and the book of words on how to operate it.

[Part 2 0:08:41] Witty: He kept off any form of pain relief until he knew what ... I think JB (John Bradford) developed the X-ray plates. They were very good apparently, I think. Iain has still got them. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. So we used to take it in turns looking after him. He gave his own diagnosis and how to put him back together again which we did do and ... I would say he was quite arrogant when he first came on base. Laws didn't apply to doctors. They were sensible people, but as you go through the history of serious accidents in the Antarctic, it is doctors that have usually had them. Afterwards I felt personally pretty put out about this and I got him in the lounge one day and I said 'Look Iain,' (this was when he was recuperating) 'you have put quite a large extra workload on everybody else on base.' I said to him 'You know, you are acting bloody stupid. This is a very serious thing that you have done.' He said 'Yes, I know.'

[Part 2 0:10:29] Witty: But he changed from there on. He became a very jocular member of the base and he remains a very good friend to this day. There was a classic example where, when he was recuperating, he was painting the corridor, and it was fatal to ever ask people what they thought something should be painted, what colour it should be painted. You just went ahead and did it, because you would have so many combinations of what other people's ideas were. So anyway Leeches was painting the corridor and one of the met men came in at lunchtime and he said 'Bloody hell, green and yellow? What colour's that?' Iain said 'You like bloody daffodils, don't you?' After that he became a very good base member.

[Part 2 0:11:31] Lee: In his recovery or his recuperation, did you manipulate him at all? [REDACTED]

Witty: Yes, but we were very careful about that. I mean he told us exactly what to do, but he relied more on his own extensions of his body by having a frame on the doorway that he could hang from, so you used to see him 'hanging about'.

[Part 2 0:12:06] Lee: There is one little story which your colleague Mike Davies has also told me about. I would quite like to hear your version. This is to do with the cook and the sleeping bag. This was your idea, wasn't it, to try and dry out ...

Witty: Well we had the bathroom out of commission for: it was supposed to be only a few days while the carpenter re-conditioned the bathroom, but after two weeks we were all getting a bit smelly and we decided that I would take the whole shower unit and everything into the generator shed and we would build a snow tank on the

surface, a melt tank half way down the shed with I think we had two immersion heaters in a 45-gallon drum, and then the shower in the corner of the generator shed. This was absolutely fantastic. It made water very quickly, kettle elements heating the top melt tank, and then lovely hot water from the secondary tank, and then down to the generators with a 50-foot head on it. So it nearly drummed you through the floor of the shower tray. Then of course you came out and you had got a 200 brake horsepower hairdryer: you used to stand in front of the generator and everybody had these massive Afro hairstyles.

[Part 2 0:13:37] Lee: Bouffant?

Witty: Yes, blow-dried in front of the generator. Anyway I was in the garage one day with Michael. Mike and I were working in the garage somewhere and the cook came up and he said to me 'Could I go and dry my sleeping bag in the generator shed?' So I said, 'Yes, fine.' There was a line in front of the radiator, which was the ... The fans used to push air over the engine and out through the radiator, rather than drawing it through and over the engine. He disappeared and we looked at each other for a few minutes and said 'I hope he is going to hang it on that line.' The next minute there was this blackout. We raced through the base with the torches and we burst into the generator shed, and Jimmy Oliver was standing there with a little piece of green material in his hand and the whole generator shed was full of feathers. For ten months afterwards we were still sweeping feathers up out of the generator shed. He had taken it to the side of the generator and of course the fan was drawing air over the engine. It had sucked the sleeping bag in and taken it in to the fan which gradually chewed it up into a million pieces. Jim hung on to it until the last minute, but it stalled the generator in the end and left him with a tiny little bit of green material in his fingers.

[Part 2 0:15:10] Lee: Another episode was to do with ... quite a long-running episode was to do with trying to free Halley III from the incursion of the ice.

Witty: Yes, yes.

[Part 2 0:15:21] Lee: This was in your second season, was it?

Witty: That was when I was base commander there, yes.

[Part 2 0:15:24] Lee: So was it your initiative to try and chip away at the ice?

Witty: Yes, it was an on-going problem in that the buildings were getting distorted. All the corridors were: if you can imagine a steel tube and then a chord across the bottom, the bottom was taken up by a walkway. Four-by-twos in the middle and then the plywood floors just reached to the edge of the Armco. These were getting so distorted, it was dangerous to walk down because ice used to get a bit of melt sometimes and then it would freeze onto the boards. And the huts were getting pressurised by the ice building up in between the Armco walls and the hut. The idea was to introduce air from the south end of the base and pass it over the huts and then exit somewhere near the garage back up to the surface, so you kept the outside temperature as a constant down in the Armco, which in theory would not melt anything (maybe a little bit of hoar frost on the Armco).

[Part 2 0:16:40] Lee: Did you have to do an awful lot of chipping?

Witty: We did. I indented for two Kango hammers, electric Kango hammers, and I thought 'It is too much for the support staff to do. There is only a carpenter, an electrician and tractor mechanic and we have all got other things to do.' So I put a notice up on the noticeboard. If any of the scientific staff, if they had any spare time, we could get a little work party together and they would be responsible for doing one sort of shift, on ice shift. It was very difficult because the only ... it was built on a latticework, the base huts were built on a latticework which meant access underneath was very difficult. So the only thing that would pass through this latticework was a coal scuttle, and we had three or four of those on the base, so that was the means of getting the chipped ice out. Someone would be wedged in between the hut and the Armco with a light-rigged Kango. Chip, chip, chip, the ice would be falling down and it would be brought out, lifted up in buckets and then someone would tip it into a 45-gallon drum.

[Part 2 0:17:59] Witty: And just for interest's sake I kept a tally of the amount of ice that came out and at the end of the year it was something like 2300 45-gallon drums of ice that we took out. But being one of the two smokers on base (I think) I decided that we had got to get to the bottom of the problem of why the ice was forming in the first place, so I went up on the roof with the electrician, and I lit a cigarette and we watched the smoke pattern and we found out that there were fans in conflicting positions. They were blowing from one end of the hut to the other towards each other. So you were getting a dead space. You had got the kitchen which, no matter how good the insulation was, there was still quite a heat loss from the kitchen into the air above the hut, and this was hanging there so consequently you were forming a tremendous amount condensation which was freezing straight away. So we got all the fans in the right direction and it never froze up again after that.

[Part 2 0:19:12] Lee: Lateral thinking?

Witty: Yes, yes.

[Part 2 0:19:14] Lee: Let me just take you, if I may ... We have only got a few minutes left now, to ... A bit later on (I am trying to work out when this was) ... All right. Was it '79 you went back to South Georgia, as base commander?

Witty: Yes.

[Part 2 0:19:31] Lee: Talk to me a bit about the relationship with the Argentinians at that time, because we are now three years before the invasion of the Argentinians.

Witty: Well the first year I apprehended a spy boat, an Argentinian.

[Part 2 0:19:49] Lee: How do you know it was a spy boat?

Witty: It was just the people on it, who made us very suspicious in the first place, because it was a beautiful old yacht but it was manned by four men who looked like typical yachtsmen, and then there was another chap who was extremely clean shaven, well-dressed and spoke perfect English. They had gone round the island of South

Georgia without coming to Grytviken as a point of entry, where they could make themselves known to say that they were in the area, and I could read them the places where they could go and where they couldn't go, and what they could do and what they couldn't do. Like no pillaging of foodstuffs and artefacts and things. Anyway we caught this yacht and they were shooting reindeer for food which you are not supposed to do, and I said to them 'You must come round to Grytviken and make a proper entry onto the island of South Georgia.'

[Part 2 0:21:02] Witty: We set off in the worst possible bloody storm. I went round on my own, with this yacht to make sure that they would come round to Grytviken and we eventually pulled into King Edward Cove, at some unearthly hour in the morning after a very rough trip round from Leith Harbour. So in the morning I interviewed them, had a look at their passports and I said to them 'What are you doing down here? First of all you are shooting reindeer and secondly you have taken some parts off the *Brutus*.' (which was a lovely old sailing ship which they had taken some of the taffrail off it). So they couldn't give a ... When I was down below on this yacht, they had a better form of communication than we had on the base. They had a fully synthesised radio and there was lots of weaponry on board this boat. They said 'We are working for Davidoff the scrap metal merchant.' So I sent a message to the Governor and he checked with Davidoff and Davidoff was absolutely furious. He thought there was somebody trying to stake a claim on this scrap metal, and he was threatening to sue them and all sorts of things.

[Part 2 0:22:29] Witty: So I got a message back saying, no, they didn't work for Davidoff. I had them in the office again. I said 'Look, you don't work for Davidoff. What are you doing?' My suspicions were aroused with these people. They were a bit odd. Then they said 'We are working for the Bank de Rosario in Buenos Aires, who are backing him.' Of course messages went backwards and forwards; they didn't know anything about them at all. The third time I had them in the office, this chap Adrian Marchesi, he just leaned back in his chair and he said 'Whatever happens in the next few months, Argentina is going to get a lot of political prestige from.' So I said 'What do you mean by that, Adrian?' and he wouldn't elaborate any more on it. I said to him 'I think you are going to have to leave here in the morning,' I said 'I am going to curtail your activities round South Georgia. You must leave the waters of South Georgia.'

[Part 2 0:23:33] Witty: That night the radio operator phoned up Shackleton House and said 'Can you come and tell this Argentinian yacht to stop transmitting.' because they were moored virtually underneath the aerial. We said 'No, we want to hear what they are saying.' We raced down and Bob Headland, who spoke very good Spanish, we sat in the radio shack and listened this Adrian Marchesi saying that he believed that the two BAS ships were north of the Falkland Islands, and he thought the *Endurance* was north of the Falkland Islands, there was no military presence on South Georgia and he signed off. He also gave the number of people on the base and if there was any shipping in the harbour. So I went and banged on the hatch cover and I said 'Adrian, who were you talking to?' He said 'I was talking to my wife.' I said 'I am sure she would be very interested, you know. You are the Stilgoe; you clear off in the morning.' and that was it. They were formally expelled from South Georgia.

[Part 2 0:24:41] Lee: And that was your responsibility as base commander at that time, to do that?

Witty: Yes, I was thrown in at the deep end.

[Part 2 0:24:48] Lee: You were a diesel engineer, a diesel mechanic.

Witty: By trade, yes, but you were sworn in as a magistrate.

[Part 2 0:24:54] Lee: Nevertheless, you were still a diesel mechanic by training, now dealing with international high-ups from a foreign country.

Witty: But it didn't stop there. Shortly after that we had some scientific equipment stolen by a Russian research vessel and the chap whose experiment was stolen ... it was only monitoring some moss banks; it wasn't a very high tech piece of equipment; it was a recorder and sensors for temperature, humidity and wind speed, and they disappeared. So I went on this Russian ship and I said 'Look, I have reason to believe that your crew or someone on your ship has stolen some of our scientific equipment.' And of course they were terribly upset because it was a Russian scientific ship. It was the *Vashkeria* [phonetic].

[Part 2 0:25:56] Witty: Anyway the captain said 'We must search the ship.' In those days they had commissars on them, who were the political officers. He was the smarmiest bugger you have ever seen in your life. He spent his time wringing his hands, standing behind the captain, whispering in his ear about various things. Anyway bits of equipment kept returning. They didn't even have the nous to throw them over the side. They were obviously caught red-handed and we could only put it down to the fact that scientific transistorised equipment was very expensive in Russia at that time, and it was too big an opportunity to miss.

[Part 2 0:26:44] Lee: Where did the *Endurance* come into all this? Did you call for the *Endurance* or did they just turn up?

Witty: No, no, the *Endurance* had nothing to do with the Russian ships at all. The *Endurance* I used to use for checking up where the Russian fishing fleet was, because at one time they used to come into Cumberland West Bay and transfer ship¹⁰ from the trawlers to the factory ship, and all of a sudden, they stopped, and they said 'Can we go to Gold Harbour?' Well when they were in Grytviken they took on fresh water which we charged them for and there were no facilities down at Gold Harbour for anything, and I could not reach it on foot or by boat. So I used to call up the *Endurance* and a couple of helicopters to fly down and see what they were up to down there. It was a huge operation but we needed to know if they were using non-selective nets and things so we used to fly and hover very low over these Russian trawlers, and then they could see what size of nets they were using, and so that was the *Endurance's* ...

[Part 2 0:28:06] Lee: Dad Etchells says that once you were out walking and came across an Argentinian ship loading scrap metal and using military personnel for

¹⁰ Presumably he means 'transfer fish'.

loading it, at one of the whaling stations. So you went back to base and informed Stanley and the *Endurance* was sent down with a bunch of Marines aboard. Is that a true story?

Witty: Yes, but it was a bit ... I wasn't the base commander then. I had gone home when they found the party of Argentinians working at Leith.

[Part 2 0:28:39] Lee: So that wasn't something you witnessed personally?

Witty: No, but I had used the *Endurance* before when I had seen the, I think it was called the *Admiral Irizar*, which was the latest icebreaker that the Argentinians had, and I saw her leaving Stromness Bay. At first I thought it was the *Bransfield* going. She is painted up pretty much the same. You just see this red and white ship disappearing, until you got the bins on it and realised it was the *Admiral Irizar* and the *Endurance* was just down at the south of the island somewhere and I was talking to Nick Barker¹¹ one night and he said 'I will come up and we will go and have a recce.' So they came into Grytviken and picked me up and we went ashore in Stromness Bay and Leith Harbour looking for evidence of a landing, and of course no sailors can resist graffiti, and there is was in black and white: '*Admiral Irizar*, such and such a date.' which was three or four days before. And you look out for things like fag-ends and film cartons and things like that. There was obvious evidence that they had been in Leith Harbour.

[Part 2 0:30:13] Lee: And you were feeding all this to British Intelligence?

Witty: Yes, yes, but whatever became of it, you never knew. It went via Rex Hunt in the Falkland Islands and then on to the powers that be.

[Part 2 0:30:27] Lee: You came out of that area, out of South Georgia, the Falklands area, just before invasion took place?

Witty: Yes. My wife was expecting Stuart, and I came out on the *John Biscoe* and they had brought some of the men down from Port Stanley. We left Grytviken and went to Signy Island and then up to Montevideo and somewhere on that dog-leg we passed the invading fleet going down to the Falklands.

[Part 2 0:31:06] Lee: You saw them?

Witty: No, we didn't see them but we heard about it of course when we got into Monte.

[Part 2 0:31:11] Lee: So you were that close, time wise, to being caught up?

Witty: Yes, to being caught up.

[Part 2 0:31:15] Lee: What were your feelings about that, because you were one of the few people in a position to actually suspect something significant was about to happen, and you were leaving?

¹¹ Captain of HMS *Endurance*, 1980-82.

Witty: Yes, I was very disappointed, to be recalled by the wife, but I understood her feelings, of expecting our son.

[Part 2 0:31:38] Lee: Maybe she did you a favour?

Witty: Well I don't know. I mean we always laugh and joke about it now. Sheila said 'You would have been down there now, pouring boiling tar on them or something.' No, it wouldn't have been anything as silly as that. But it was a culmination of two years of suspicion really that came to fruition. Steve Martin, who was my deputy then, who I left in charge, he told me ... He speaks very little about it; it did unnerve him slightly I think. It was pretty full on when it first started, the bombardment of a certain area of the base, well opposite the base, where they were obviously showing what they could do if they wanted to. And then they sent in a frigate and the Royal Marines punched it full of holes as it came in. They obviously didn't know where they were going. They tore into a keyhole really, a keyhole shaped cove, through a narrows, where the Carl Gustav rocket launcher was and the Marines just 'pum, pum, pum' filled it full of holes and then it was like a learner driver trying to turn round to get out again and as they came out again, they had plenty of time to do the same again.

[Part 2 0:33:15] Lee: Sadly we must stop because this room is needed.

Witty: That's no problem. That's all right.

[Part 2 0:33:22] [End of Part Two]

ENDS

Possible extracts:

- 'Too old for the job'. [Part 1 0:00:56]
- 'Pseuds' Corner'. [Part 1 0:11:08]
- BAS not in London. [Part 1 0:15:20]
- A sausage lands on job advert. [Part 1 0:20:52]
- Fire pump converted to diving compressor. [Part 1 0:23:11]
- Life in the 'Plastic Palace'. [Part 1 0:28:38]
- Signy Light Railway. [Part 1 0:32:51]
- Dropping a tractor through the sea ice. [Part 1 0:50:40]
- Retrieving a sledge from a crevasse. [Part 2 0:01:09]
- The doctor has an accident. [Part 2 0:05:56]
- A shower in the generator shed. [Part 2 0:12:06]
- The wrong way to dry a sleeping bag. [Part 2 0:13:37]
- Ice chipping in the Armco tubes. [Part 2 0:15:24]
- Apprehending an Argentinian spy yacht. [Part 2 0:19:49]