

KEN POWELL

Edited transcript of a recording of Ken Powell interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on 19th November 2011. BAS Archives ADC/24/1/162. Transcribed by Andy Smith, 15th March 2013.

[Part 1 0:00:00] Lee: This is Ken Powell interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 30th of April 2012. Ken Powell, Part One.

Powell: My name is Ken Powell. I was born in London, near the Elephant & Castle, in 1928.

[Part 1 0:00:19] Lee: What date?

Powell: The 27<sup>th</sup> of February 1928.

[Part 1 0:00:25] Lee: So you are now 84?

Powell: 84, yes.

[Part 1 0:00:29] Lee: Tell me about your parents. What did your dad do?

Powell: My father, he was a civil servant. He worked in the Post Office at Mount Pleasant. My mother, she was a typist. They were both Londoners and my family were about 4<sup>th</sup> generation of Londoners, from the centre of London.

[Part 1 0:00:58] Lee: Was your dad mechanically minded?

Powell: Not particularly. He was in the First World War, in the artillery. He was a signaller in the Horse Artillery, but he wasn't particularly mechanically minded.

[Part 1 0:01:10] Lee: What about your education, Ken?

Powell: I went to an ordinary council school which I left at 14. I didn't get a scholarship to the grammar school. My spelling wasn't that good. Then I went to work in an electronics firm and became a trainee draughtsman, but when I left school I enrolled at night school, three nights a week on an engineering course, the Higher National Electrical Engineering Diploma, which I did for a number of years. And even when I got demobbed, I had to do an extra two years of night school, three nights a week. So that was my basic education.

[Part 1 0:01:54] Lee: So where did the interest in engineering come from, then, if it didn't come from your father?

Powell: Well it was sort of natural. I am fairly mechanically minded. Well the engineering was actually electrical and electronic engineering and certainly I did well in the drawing office. That was my sort of thing.

[Part 1 0:02:23] Lee: You became involved in radar work?

Powell: That was when I was called up. In April 1946 I was called up and became selected as a radar mechanic and it was a year's course, at Yatesbury. So I worked through the course and then was posted to Egypt for about 18 months, on radar.

[Part 1 0:02:53] Lee: Was that interesting work?

Powell: Very interesting. It was rather low key because the war had finished and there wasn't a great deal to do.

[Part 1 0:03:06] Lee: What was it about it which attracted you? What made you feel happy about doing that kind of work? Were you breaking new ground?

Powell: I don't know. It just seemed to suit my temperament. I can't really answer that. It just happened. I was quite happy doing it so I think I had found the right type of work, and stayed with it.

[Part 1 0:03:41] Lee: Am I right in thinking that wasn't long after radar became quite commonplace? You were working in radar shortly after, well not long after it had been devised?

Powell: Well it was really devised in the late '30s in its theoretical state. It became a practical weapon in 1940 and then it was used in aircraft extensively but it was quite widely used by the end of the war.

[Part 1 0:04:15] Lee: In your time were you aware of perfections or changes or improvements that were taking place?

Powell: No, because I was out in Egypt, in the Air Force. The war had ended. There was a huge amount of equipment laying around to be repaired or serviced and then it was largely going to be destroyed. There was just too much equipment.

[Part 1 0:04:45] Lee: So were you patching things up then really?

Powell: Yes.

[Part 1 0:04:48] Lee: It must have been quite exciting to be a young man, being posted in Egypt.

Powell: Oh it was very exciting because during the war it was all rationing and so forth. I was in Ismailia, on the Bitter Lakes. When you had a 48-hour leave or a 7-day leave, you went to Port Said. That was remarkable. It was the first time I had come across red wine, steaks and very good cooking, which just wasn't available in wartime in England. And it was quite exciting because there were about three or four languages spoken by the locals: English, Arabic, French and Greek and you would go into a restaurant and just listen and chaps in dark suits and a tarboosh, they switched languages just to make a point in the conversation. They were very fluent.

[Part 1 0:05:53] Lee: Did you get out into the desert at all, Ken?

Powell: Yes, I did some sailing on the Great Bitter Lakes and again at Port Said the NAAFI was on the third floor overlooking the harbour and the amazing thing was the traffic going through the Suez Canal. About every three minutes a ship went in. They went down the canal one day and up the canal the next, so they were just queuing up to go down.

[Part 1 0:06:21] Lee: Did you get out into the desert area, the sand dunes?

Powell: Yes I did because we had equipment to service in the desert, on lorries.

[Part 1 0:06:30] Lee: People say the Antarctic is a bit of a desert.

Powell: Oh yes. Well Hope Bay, it was quite scenic: mountain peaks, ice cliffs, glaciers, sea and sea ice. Then I went to Halley Bay some time later, and that was just snow, white. It was either snow or ice cliffs in the horizon. It was a very boring panorama.

[Part 1 0:07:05] Lee: Tell me about how you became involved in British Antarctic Survey. What was your first knowledge of the Antarctic?

Powell: Well after I was demobbed, I was working for Decca, installing radar on ships, servicing. Then I felt like a change so I became a technical writer, writing instruction manuals for transmitters and receivers for a company making transmitters and receivers. But one of my main interests was reading. I have always read quite widely and I had read one or two accounts of the life in the Antarctic and heard about Crown Agents. So I went along and saw them and was interested. It was at the right time because it was coming up to the relief period and they were looking for diesel electric mechanics.

[Part 1 0:08:09] Lee: Do you have any memories of the interview at all? It was a long time ago.

Powell: No. As to be expected, it was fairly searching and I was a bit surprised it wasn't more technical because my knowledge of diesel generators was not very great. I mean I was working on radar. The diesel generators were an auxiliary thing. I wasn't a mechanic and I was surprised. I think they were short. I think they were really short of diesel mechanics, otherwise a professional mechanic might have got the job.

[Part 1 0:08:55] Lee: When you say the interview was quite intensive then, and they weren't asking particularly about your professional qualifications, were they actually sussing you out as a human being?

Powell: Yes indeed. And the medical was also fairly rigorous.

[Part 1 0:09:14] Lee: What made you want to go?

Powell: Well I was in a mood for a change and it sounded interesting. I could just as easily have gone off into a desert. I was just in a mood for a change: not just a change of job but a change of lifestyle.

[Part 1 0:09:38] Lee: Had you met anybody who had been before you?

Powell: No, no.

[Part 1 0:09:44] Lee: And what did your parents make of this sudden move?

Powell: I think they were intrigued and puzzled and sort of went along with it in a sense. The idea that I would be away for a year ... I wasn't living at home. I was living in London, in the centre, and they were in the suburbs of London, in Surrey. I lived in a series of bedsits. I was very interested in London. I used to do a lot of walking round looking and finding out about London.

[Part 1 0:10:20] Lee: Tell me about the process of preparing to go. What do you recall from that? Were you trained?

Powell: No, I just was given the date, the sailing of the *John Biscoe*. I was sharing a flat with a chap in Clapham Common and I remember just saying goodbye to him and giving him quite a handsome present, my ration book. Yes, food was still on ration then and to have a ration book given ... Yes, and then joined the *John Biscoe* and that was my really first contact with all the other types going down.

[Part 1 0:11:07] Lee: You joined the *John Biscoe* in Southampton?

Powell: Yes.

[Part 1 0:11:09] Lee: This would be the end of 1954?

Powell: No, '52. October '52.

[Part 1 0:11:17] Lee: So that would be the old wooden *John Biscoe*?

Powell: Oh yes it was.

[Part 1 0:11:20] Lee: Can you describe it to me? What was she like?

Powell: Well the hull was made of 14-inch timbers. It was called a boom defence vessel. It was for putting down anti-submarine nets. The engines were diesel electric and they had this huge derrick on the fo'c'sle which could take the entire power of the engine room, which was required for lifting anti-submarine nets.

[Part 1 0:11:57] Lee: So was she still in war fatigues? Was she fitted out still for war?

Powell: Well I think she had finished the war and then had some adjustments to make her suitable for the Antarctic. I don't know that the bow had been strengthened for ice. The crew were certainly wartime. The Chief Engineer for instance was ... he had served right through the war. The crew had all got war experience.

[Part 1 0:12:35] Lee: Who was the captain?

Powell: Bill Johnson.

[Part 1 0:12:38] Lee: What did you make of him?

Powell: Well he as quite a character because he featured in the Antarctic. If there were any problems, he looked into it. Whichever base they visited, if there was a problem, I think it was his job to be something of a trouble-shooter.

[Part 1 0:13:00] Lee: So was he senior, then, to the base leader?

Powell: Bill Johnson, the captain of the *Biscoe*? Very much so.

[Part 1 0:13:07] Lee: Right, OK. So they did what he said?

Powell: Oh yes. Yes, indeed. To some extent he was senior of the Secretary of the FIDS, the chief Fid came round.

[Part 1 0:13:23] Lee: What was his character like Was he a fair man?

Powell: Yes. He was what one expected a ship's captain to be. Yes he was fair. He didn't appear ... You didn't see a lot of him except on the bridge.

[Part 1 0:13:54] Lee: Was there any sense of fuss when the *Biscoe* left Southampton? Did Fuchs come to wave you goodbye or ...?

Powell: No, not on the *John Biscoe*. It just sailed and then we had got a 6-week voyage, or thereabouts, and we all got together and introduced ourselves to each other, and so on. On my trip to Halley Bay, on the *Tottan* which was a Norwegian sealer, there was quite a send-off. I was responsible for the diesel generators and the tractors, four tractors, and while we were just chatting to parents, waiting for the ship to sail, they suddenly decided there was too much deck cargo, and two of the tractors had to come off. So I rapidly took the important parts of the engine off, for extra spares. They took the tractors off; then they suddenly had a change of mind and put the tractors back on again. So I had got two tractors that had been partly dismantled, so on the way down I had to put it all together again.

[Part 1 0:15:17] Lee: That was before the '56 trip to Hope Bay, then?

Powell: That was the '55 trip to Halley Bay.

[Part 1 0:15:23] Lee: To Halley Bay; I beg your pardon.

Powell: Whereas going to Hope Bay, the departure was ... Well I went along to the quay; I was told which quay in Southampton Dock, it was. The tide was out. It was only 470 tons and I just saw the mast. My first impression was 'Well, where is it?' There was this mast, with a crow's nest, and then as the tide came in the hull appeared.

[Part 1 0:15:55] Lee: So you could just see it over the edge of the quay?

Powell: Yes.

[Part 1 0:15:58] Lee: Was she a good sailing vessel?

Powell: Well 470 tons in the South Atlantic, it tended to roll slightly. I don't really know because other than being on a troopship, it was my only experience of a very small ship.

[Part 1 0:16:25] Lee: Were you seasick, then?

Powell: Yes, oh yes.

[Part 1 0:16:27] Lee: Severely?

Powell: No. You learned to cope with it.

[Part 1 0:16:35] Lee: What do you remember of the voyage? I guess you crossed the Equator at some point?

Powell: Yes, we had the usual ceremony, but getting to know the other Fids, that was interesting.

[Part 1 0:16:49] Lee: Did you strike up any particular friendships?

Powell: Yes. Well they didn't last because we went to different bases. I was friendly with Alan Tritton, Roger Banks (who had an obituary not so long ago) and one or two others, I can't quite remember. We were all exploring each other.

[Part 1 0:17:15] Lee: The ship called at Montevideo on the way South, then Ken? What do recall of that?

Powell: Going into the harbour there was this red marker buoy and the tripod mast of the *Graf Spee* sticking out of the water.

[Part 1 0:17:36] Lee: German?

Powell: Yes, you know, the famous battle of the *Graf Spee*. That took me right back because in the early part of the war it was a famous battle and I remember listening to the 6 o'clock news about the battle and so forth, and here was the wreck of the *Graf Spee*. It was quite remarkable.

[Part 1 0:17:59] Lee: Did you have much time in Montevideo?

Powell: We had about four days on the way down and about ten days on the way out.

[Part 1 0:18:09] Lee: What did you make of the city?

Powell: Well it was very interesting. It was just interesting. I went round looking at the sights, or two or three of us did, and the food, that was interesting as well, Spanish/ Portuguese restaurants.

[Part 1 0:18:30] Lee: Tell me about Port Stanley when you got there. How did it strike you?

Powell: Well I didn't know what to expect, but it was certainly a colonial post. There were no cars, no vehicles. Roads had been built and surfaced but during the war they'd had a number of tanks and the tanks patrolling the streets had just broken up the surface of the roads. So there were no vehicles except for the Governor's taxi. He had a pre-war London taxi and that was the only vehicle. Otherwise it was all horses.

[Part 1 0:19:15] Lee: You describe it as being a bit of a 'wild-west' town.

Powell: Yes, I mean coming from London, that was my impression. In particular on a Saturday night there was a dance. It was something of a barn dance. We all came together with the local girls. There was quite a crowd in the dance hall, or in the hall where the dance was held. But it was a barn dance.

[Part 1 0:19:46] Lee: The local lasses must have had a regular supply, an annual supply of potential husbands?

Powell: Yes, that's right. One or two did marry.

[Part 1 0:19:54] Lee: Can you describe the town at that time, in 1952?

Powell: It was small houses, quite a lot of them made of timber, small cottage-type houses and heated by peat. It was a weekly job of each householder, to go and cut some peat for the fire. There was electricity as far as I know and the Falkland Island Store, it was a great big store rather like the sort of store you would see in a cowboy film. There was a pub which was a timber-built building and you went into this pub and there was a barmaid and you chatted away but the first thing you had to do was take out your sheath knife and put it on a block. All the knives, while you were in the pub, they had to be in this block in case there was a fight. [laughs] We felt rather special.

[Part 1 0:21:13] Lee: Do you think that was the landlady's instructions, or ...?

Powell: I don't know. It's a port so they have a lot of sailors coming in at different times, usually having rounded the Horn. They come in; the first call after rounding the Horn is into Port Stanley.

[Part 1 0:21:32] Lee: I presume you were kitted out in Stanley, were you?

Powell: Yes.

[Part 1 0:21:37] Lee: What did you get? Did you get what you needed?

Powell: You got your Antarctic clothes and boots, leather sea boots and then also your canvas boots which you wore with an inner felt boot and then woollen stockings. Yes, all the clothes. I think things like skis and all that sledging equipment, that was on the base. Anorak, windproofs, and long johns. The woollen long johns came right up here and you folded them over.

[Part 1 0:22:34] Lee: So they came up to your armpits almost?

Powell: Yes.

[Part 1 0:22:36] Lee: And the top was folded over to be an extra layer?

Powell: That was the fashion, folded over, yes.

[Part 1 0:22:43] Lee: Folded over under the clothing or did it appear of the top of the trousers?

Powell: Well some wore it over the top of the trousers; some tucked it under their shirts. And in the summer you wore ordinary underwear. It was a winter thing.

[Part 1 0:22:58] Lee: I guess that gave you a certain amount of extra warmth, did it?

Powell: Yes, essential, yes. And gloves and a glove harness. You learned to keep your ... when you were working outside you would have to do some work without gloves like splicing ropes and working with screwdrivers, tools, and then regularly put your hands in your gloves to warm them up. You just put them in and there was this harness and you had these great big gloves always there.

[Part 1 0:23:27] Lee: Round your neck? Like a kind of apron but with glove pockets?

Powell: Yes. It was a lampwick, a very wide lampwick harness with a cross piece.

[Part 1 0:23:39] Lee: Did it work?

Powell: Yes.

[Part 1 0:23:42] Lee: So did all this clothing fit?

Powell: Yes pretty well, and it didn't matter if it didn't. You tucked it in. But yes, it did fit. It wasn't unlike being kitted out in the Services. You just went and got kitted out and it worked.

[Part 1 0:24:06] Lee: OK. And then you sailed off to Hope Bay; that was your first sight really of an Antarctic base?

Powell: Yes.

[Part 1 0:24:14] Lee: Tell me what your first impressions were, if you can recall them.

Powell: Coming through the sea ice and the first signs of penguins and seal. On the way down we had seen albatross; for two or three days we had watched the albatross. Also flying fish, that was quite a surprise. Going through about 700 miles of pack ice, going into Hope Bay, it was a range of mountain peaks and glaciers. Going into the bay, on the left hand side, there were these gravestones. There were three (I think it was three) gravestones that stood out in the sunlight and we were told that there had



been a fire two or three or four years earlier and the hut was burned down, and they were the casualties<sup>1</sup>. Then the year before we came in the party had rebuilt the hut. It was a new hut, built the year before we came, and as we came into the bay, it was about 200 feet above the sea on a rock outcrop, and in sunlight it looked fine. It looked wonderful. It was quite an attractive site. It was high up, overlooking the bay surrounded by the glacier and the range of mountain peaks, snow covered and ice cliffs. It was very good.

[Part 1 0:25:48] Lee: What was the hut like, this new hut?

Powell: It was made of wooden planking, tongue and groove planking, about 70-80 foot long and about 30-40 foot wide. Wood is a very good material for an Antarctic hut, an inner and outer layer with insulation in-between. The windows were still only single glazed. Double glazing hadn't really come about in those days. But it was very comfortable.

[Part 1 0:26:27] Lee: Was it finished?

Powell: Oh yes.

[Part 1 0:26:30] Lee: Or was there more to be done to it?

Powell: I had to do some work. The four generators were in place and the hut was wired but I had to do some further wiring, for lighting and power points.

[Part 1 0:26:45] Lee: The generators were in a separate shed; is that right?

Powell: No. At the front of the hut there was an engine room, which was pretty well the first room as you entered and there were four generators, spaced out, with a switchboard and then a bank of lead acid batteries to supply... There was a 12-volt system which was in operation when the generators were off. The generators came on at 8 in the morning until about 10 at night, and then there was a 12-volt system for lighting.

[Part 1 0:27:29] Lee: Was that because of the noise?

Powell: Both the noise and the conservation of fuel. I mean you had to have a year's fuel, and other than the met man, nobody was awake at night or working at night. One met man was taking observations every three or four hours, so it would have been quite a waste of fuel to run it during the night.

[Part 1 0:27:55] Lee: And I guess they were quite noisy, were they?

Powell: No. If you have been on board a ship you get used to the ship's engine. It just is something in the background. No they weren't noisy. They were a rhythmical humming sort of noise.

[Part 1 0:28:12] Lee: How sophisticated were they?

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver Burd and Michael Green died in the hut fire, 9 November 1948

Powell: Oh pretty basic. They were air-cooled, hand-started, but it was a good design and it was proven for reliability and having four of them, only one was on at any one time so you had quite a good reserve if one went wrong. You had a good supply of spares.

[Part 1 0:28:40] Lee: Who was the manufacturer?

Powell: Enfield.

[Part 1 0:28:43] Lee: Oh right. Did you have to bodge any spares?

Powell: No, no. In fact I didn't have any real trouble. I did the systematic overhauls as required but we never had any breakdowns that couldn't be remedied by a spare part.

[Part 1 0:29:10] Lee: How about the fuel? How did you supply the generators with their fuel.

Powell: 30-gallon fuel drums, diesel fuel in 30-gallon drums which were laid out in a row outside with a marker at each end, because they had about 3 foot of snow in over the period on top. You would bring a drum in a week before it was needed, so that it could come up to room temperature.

[Part 1 0:29:43] Lee: A week?

Powell: Yes. Well I did. That was just my routine and then fill up the ... There was a tank to each generator. You filled the tank up but while I was there I changed the system and then had a 30-gallon drum mounted on a pillar so that that one drum supplied all four, and took the tanks off which gave a bit more room.

[Part 1 0:30:17] Lee: What was the thinking behind that? Was that just for the ease of ... ?

Powell: Convenience, in that one drum supplied all four engines instead of having a separate tank to each. It meant that you didn't have to fill the tank every day. It was a smallish tank, you see.

[Part 1 0:30:40] Lee: I presume you had to dig these drums out from time to time?

Powell: Oh yes.

[Part 1 0:30:44] Lee: What other digging duties did you find yourself performing?

Powell: Well, digging the hut out, the entrance to the hut. Sometimes it would be four or five foot of snow. You had got to dig the entrance out. The stores generally, the fuel, the anthracite, the food ... The *Biscoe* would bring down each year something like 60-70 tons of stores and these would be sledged up to the hut and then laid out in lines and a marker flag at the beginning and at the end of each line so once the snow was on the top, you knew where to start digging.

[Part 1 0:31:27] Lee: Somebody had thought all this out, hadn't they?

Powell: Oh yes, but then the tradition, it was pre-war. There had been Antarctic base well obviously for a hundred years or so. But certainly in the '30s there had been bases where I think the technique was evolved.

[Part 1 0:31:48] Lee: Did you find yourself being called upon to fix things, being a mechanic?

Powell: Yes, I tended to have to fix things. George Marsh once wanted me to drill a tooth for a filling, and then I repaired the radio with my Air Force experience. Once or twice the main radio developed a fault and I was able to repair it. Then odd bits of metal that were needed for brackets and so forth. Oh and that occasion when Vesta, one of the husky bitches, George said she had developed a growth in her vagina and he wanted to operate and he needed a clamp to put in and open the vagina and he showed me some photographs from a medical book and I made a rough copy from pieces of brass and a threaded rod. Yes, that worked. That was quite interesting.

[Part 1 0:33:03] Lee: This was Vesta the dog, wasn't it? What was wrong with her, exactly?

Powell: She had this growth in her vagina and she wasn't any good for pulling a sledge but she was a good breeding bitch and that was the point of the operation, so that she could carry on breeding.

[Part 1 0:33:21] Lee: Is that the oddest thing you have ever had to make in your life?

Powell: I should think it is, yes.

[Part 1 0:33:27] Lee: There was another Geoff on the base who you became friendly with, Geoff Brookfield? You were both 'green' boys.

Powell: Yes, we came down together. He was a met man. He had done the short course. I think he was an accountant or an accounts clerk, but he did the short met course and became a met man. It was he, Geoff Brookfield, who was at the Battle of Cassino. He was an anti-tank gunner during the war and had a lot of interesting stories to tell.

[Part 1 0:34:05] Lee: This is Monte Cassino in Italy?

Powell: Yes.

[Part 1 0:34:08] Lee: Gosh. So was it normal for the new guys to become friends, or was there a particular bond?

Powell: No. I mean we had had six weeks on the *John Biscoe* on the way down, where we had explored each other and then went to different bases. Geoff and I went to the same base and then we spent two years together on the base. But you were friendly with other chaps on the base who were already there, who had done their first year.

[Part 1 0:34:43] Lee: What were the living quarters like?

Powell: Comfortable. The living room was about 30-40 foot square, with 11 bunks and then a table for 12, heated by one stove, and then a number of armchairs. That was where we ate and lived. Next to that was the galley which was quite a large one with an Esse stove fired by anthracite. And then a number of other rooms of the hut: the met office, the radio cabin, the toilets, a sledge workshop, other workshops. But it was all in wood. The ambience, we kept the heat in the hut ... The hut was only just above freezing, so that it didn't make the contrast between being inside and outside wasn't too great.

[Part 1 0:35:52] Lee: You kept the temperature down on purpose?

Powell: Yes. When you were gash hand – there were two gash hands every week doing household duties – when you were scrubbing the floor, as you scrubbed the floor it would freeze. So one had the brush and was scrubbing and the other one had the cloth and as soon as you had finished the scrub, you would wipe off the surplus water, otherwise it would freeze. That was the interior of the hut.

[Part 1 0:36:19] Lee: Gosh! Was the bunk OK for you?

Powell: Yes. It was a standard bunk, a wooden bunk, with a mattress. Yes, that was all right.

[Part 1 0:36:33] Lee: The toilets? I need to ask you how good the toilets were?

Powell: They were made ... It was a wooden seat but they were over 30-gallon fuel drums. You took the top off a fuel drum, an empty fuel drum, and put it under the seat. There were two steps up because the drum is about waist height. You had buckets on the outside, in the corridor. So you urinated in the buckets and then went into these seats for other jobs and the remarkable thing was that after about a week there was this sort of pyramid of excrement, a conical pyramid, which proved that everybody's essential parts were on the same centre line. [laughs]

[Part 1 0:37:36] Lee: This was a frozen pyramid, was it?

Powell: Yes. The gash hands on duty took the urine in the buckets. They were in tins. I don't know what came in the tins, but we chucked those into the ... They later went down to the ice cliff, into the sea. But the excrement went down a special crevasse. We selected one of the very deep crevasses and systematically put it in the tin and rolled it into the crevasse.

[Part 1 0:38:08] Lee: Oh, the drum itself?

Powell: Yes. To minimise the ...

[Part 1 0:38:11] Lee: Spread?

Powell: Yes. So that it didn't spoil the site, because it is alien matter in an Antarctic setting.

[Part 1 0:38:26] Lee: Did you think about that, all those years ago?

Powell: Yes, and then the gash from the kitchen was in another, always in the same spot. You poured this hot water down and it developed a well of its own. We used the same place and then after a certain time backfilled it with about 20 foot of snow and compacted it, hoping that it would sterilise itself.

[Part 1 0:38:54] Lee: But it would eventually all go out to sea, wouldn't it?

Powell: Oh yes, because it was on a moving glacier.

[Part 1 0:39:01] Lee: And the toilets, were they cold to the rear end?

Powell: Oh yes, because they weren't heated. So you had half an inch of frost. You could either scrape it off or get used to it. Yes, you didn't need to delay or spent too much time there.

[Part 1 0:39:20] Lee: George Marsh, you were lucky to have a doctor on base I think, weren't you in those days?

Powell: Well not lucky. It was the form that a ten-man sledging base had a doctor but the other, five-man bases didn't. But a sledging base always had a doctor and usually he was the base leader.

[Part 1 0:39:36] Lee: And was he in your case?

Powell: Yes.

[Part 1 0:39:40] Lee: But he was on the radio to other bases when required?

Powell: Yes. That was part of the system. They called him up when they had a problem. And each base had a first aid manual, quite a good one, called *The Ship Captain's Medical Guide* and the most quotable thing there was 'How to give an injection: throw the hypodermic into the northwest corner of the buttocks.'

[Part 1 0:40:11] Lee: Did Dr Marsh ever do that?

Powell: Yes we had one or two. We didn't have anybody seriously injured. Bob Stoneley, the geologist, got a very badly frostbitten hand and that had to be dealt with medically. Apparently it is the same treatment as for a serious burn and as it was healing he got a bowl of water with a sixpenny piece at the bottom and Bob had to systematically put his hand in and collect the sixpence and put it out, then put it back in, and do this many many times. That was to get the fingers working again.

[Part 1 0:40:55] Lee: How interesting. Were there any other medical emergencies with anybody else?

Powell: No, I don't recollect. There was certainly nothing very dramatic.

[Part 1 0:41:10] Lee: As the diesel mechanic, were you able to get out into the field?

Powell: Oh yes, I did quite a lot of sledging because my duties were not that demanding, an hour or so a day. So I did a lot of work with the dogs, and repairs to the hut and the like. But I got out quite a bit. I had several sledging trips of several days, because the surveyors had long journeys but they needed depots of food. So we laid depots say 30 miles from the base or more, to support the surveyors.

[Part 1 0:41:59] Lee: How did you take to sledging with dogs?

Powell: Very much. I liked it. You learned it systematically, from the old hands, and it had a logic of its own. And I liked the dogs. That was a particular, or the main pleasure of being in the Antarctic.

[Part 1 0:42:24] Lee: Camping on ice, was that a problem for you?

Powell: No. You learned the skill of pitching a tent. There was a system. Deciding to camp, the dogs have got to be settled down. A picket, a steel picket, was driven in and they were anchored to this picket. This was all done ... It was a two-man team. One was the 'outside man' who would see to the settling of the dogs. We would erect the tent and then the 'inside man' would sort out the interior of the tent and cook the meals. Then you changed over next day, and you became the outside man.

[Part 1 0:43:11] Lee: Do you have any idea where that methodology came from?

Powell: No.

[Part 1 0:43:16] Lee: It was universal, wasn't it?

Powell: It was universal, yes. Another piece I remember, we had a tear in the tent and I wasn't sure how it occurred and it needed a patch. That was about 6" by 4" and the way to do it was to have one person inside and one person outside. You put the needle through and the chap on the inside took the needle, threaded it another a stitch and it went round like that, all the way round, until it was stitched on.

[Part 1 0:43:56] Lee: Pushing it back and forth through the canvas? Which was the most popular job, indoors or outdoors man?

Powell: Well you didn't really give it a thought in that way. I mean when you woke up of a morning, the inside man had got to cook the breakfast. You had a primus and you had made the porridge the night before and there it was as a cylinder of ice. So you lit the primus. You are doing this from your sleeping bag. You just light it. Sometimes the meths, it was so cold you had to hold the match for some time to get the meths to go and it would just about glow. You would give it a pump and then slowly you would get the primus going. Then you put the billycan of frozen porridge on and you have got to stir, rotate this cylinder of porridge until it becomes a liquid and then cook it for breakfast.

[Part 1 0:45:06] Lee: Were you using the same pyramid-type tents that Scott had had?

Powell: Yes I think so. It was a pyramid. It was about 7 ft square. Four bamboo poles about 7 ft high, with an inner and outer fabric. When you got to the ground the gap between the two layers was about a foot. Bamboo and then there was a vent at the top and a number of hooks. You hung your clothing up and even if it was pretty damp, with the primus underneath it was warmed and dried.

[Part 1 0:45:56] Lee: So one little primus stove could heat a whole tent, dry your clothes and ...?

Powell: Yes, that's right.

[Part 1 0:46:01] Lee: So why didn't the heat escape through the canvas?

Powell: Well it was a very strong canvas and maybe there was some heat loss but the primus is quite an efficient producer of heat. Then you turned it out and then slept and when you awoke, everything was frozen and your sleeping bag had got a mass of frozen dew on it.

[Part 1 0:46:35] Lee: All the more reason to stay put and just light the primus with one finger, one hand?

Powell: Yes, that's it.

[Part 1 0:46:43] Lee: The pyramid shape of the tent, was that ever tested by the elements whilst you were there, by a big blow?

Powell: It had a natural advantage that when the wind hit the tent, the resultant force was downwards, and we certainly had 50-60 knot gusts to cope with.

[Part 1 0:47:06] Lee: The dogs, of course, would need feeding, wouldn't they?

Powell: Oh yes. When you were sledging, invariably you were feeding them pemmican every day, but at base they were fed 6 lb of seal meat every other day. And this had to be caught. You were out in the bay as soon as there were any leads in the ice, open water channels, you would be out in the dinghy with an outboard motor, two of you. Any seal, with a rifle shoot the seal, gut it, and then tow it back to the ice cliff, But in the summer when the leads were quite wide, quite often there would be killer whales and they had this huge fin, this white pinky fin. We were quite fearful of those. We always carried a knife in the stern and if there were any killer whales about, you would cut the tow and then got ashore as quickly as you could. You know, towing a bloody carcass of a seal, with a killer whale in the bay ...

[Part 1 0:48:22] Lee: Did that ever happen?

Powell: No, we never had any ... no we didn't.

[Part 1 0:48:28] Lee: But you had been taught about it, so there must have been ... So there was a degree of training going on?

Powell: Oh yes. Yes, indeed, the training it was quite positive.

[Part 1 0:48:39] Lee: But it was kind of 'on the job'?

Powell: On the job. You learned on the job, that's it, from the previous, the first year blokes.

[Part 1 0:48:47] Lee: Your team, I think, was called the Gangsters?

Powell: Well there were several teams and you tended to drive several, but the team I drive most was the Gangsters. Their leader was Pundit. He was a bit of an intellectual. He was a bit temperamental, but the leader was chosen because they were a bit more intelligent than the others. Forty feet away, on the trace, so you had to shout your commands to the leader and a well-trained leader was a pleasure because if you wanted a slight turn you shouted quietly but if you needed a right-angled turn you would shout louder and the leader would respond.

[Part 1 0:49:37] Lee: So it wasn't just the word you said, it was the energy with which you said the word.

Powell: Yes. The commands I rather fancy ... The dogs were from Greenland. They were East Greenland dogs and I imagine the commands had come down with the dogs. Whoever went to get the dogs had learned the commands. So to start the sledge ... The runners were surfaced with Tufnol, so where the sledge goes through the snow, the weight of it, the friction generates a wet ... It melts the snow immediately under the sledge and when you stop, it freezes and the sledge tends to stick. So when you come to start the dogs, you gather a great loop in the trace so that when they run, it jerks and breaks it free. So you pull back the trace and say 'Now dogs, now dogs, weet weet weet', and off they go and as the handlebar comes past, you catch hold of that and you are either skiing with it or you are trotting. Unless the sledge is empty, you don't ride on the sledge, you trot along beside it.

[Part 1 0:50:56] Lee: Why was that?

Powell: Well because of the weight. When you are sledging, weight is critical. Your personal effects and everything is reduced to a minimum. An all-up load would be about 1200 lb, but that includes tent, dog food, human food, your spade and pickets and everything.

[Part 1 0:51:22] Lee: Did you ever have any tricky moments?

Powell: Well on the sea ice where there are all sorts of bergy bits frozen in, sledges overturn, or you can go through the ice. To test whether the sea ice was strong enough to take the sledge, if you come to a lead that's frozen over, you had a broom handle with an inch-wide chisel on the end, and you went into the frozen area and if it would take three blows, it was strong enough to take the sledge. And a man on skis of course, the bearing surface of a man on skis is much less than a man on boots.



[Part 1 0:52:12] Lee: Mm, interesting. How far away did you get? Over the sea ice to the neighbouring islands or ...?

Powell: Oh yes, the sea ice is quite a good route. If you are going to do a long journey round the coast, it would be easier going on the sea ice than on the glaciers and the ice cliff and the mountain ranges. So the sea ice was the chosen way to travel.

[Part 1 0:52:37] Lee: But it wouldn't be there all the year, would it?

Powell: No. In the open season you would have to go inland.

[Part 1 0:52:48] Lee: How far could you get in one day?

Powell: We used to reckon 20 miles a day or 6 hours. Because you might well spend a whole day doing no more than 2 or 3 miles.

[Part 1 0:53:01] Lee: Were you working with maps, or a compass, or ...?

Powell: You had a ship's compass on the handlebars of the sledge, and maps, but distances: it was a bicycle wheel with a pedometer on it. So you had the front fork of a bicycle pivoted on the rear of the sledge, with a bicycle wheel with a tyre and we wrapped a load of lampwick around it to get a better grip. And you read the pedometer of the bicycle wheel for distance, which wasn't very efficient because sometimes it would slip or sometimes it would freeze. Whereas the compass gave you a very accurate bearing, your distances were your weakest ..., where the error was greatest, in trying to estimate distance.

[Part 1 0:53:56] Lee: Were there any other rituals associates with sledging? Any particular habits or traditions or instructions or orders?

Powell: I am sure there were.

[Part 1 0:54:06] Lee: I am thinking about alcohol.

Powell: Oh no, there was no alcohol. There was always a bottle of brandy, a small bottle of brandy in the first aid bag but it was a tradition: there was no alcohol when you were sledging because of the effect of the cold. It was immediate.

[Part 1 0:54:27] Lee: You would take breaks every so often of course and I think there was a song that you sang sometimes.

Powell: Oh yes. Twenty miles a day, or six hours, and a break every hour. The dogs aren't machines. The dogs have got to be considered and we would have a ten-minute break and talk to them and play with them, and wrestle with them. Then when we were running, sometimes we would sing to them, typically 'I don't care if it snows or freezes. I am safe in the arms of Jesus. I am Jesus' little lamb. Yes by Jesus Christ I am. Weet you buggers, weet!' And their tails would go up and they would run. It had an effect. Then on the other hand, if you were driving into a forty knot wind, and the course you were taking was right into the wind, you really had to drive them and you are shouting against a 40 kt wind to the leader: 'Weet, Pundit, weet.' and after a bit,

you could still shout but you would lose your speaking voice. You would just lose your voice. You can still shout and you have got to drive into the wind. That was one of the worst things, especially if there was a blizzard.

[Part 1 0:55:50] Lee: Did the dogs ever sing?

Powell: At night they would bark. You always had a bitch in the first pair and if there was a bitch on heat, you would almost certainly have a fight in the night. That was the job of the outside man. If there was a fight in the night, the outside man was straight out, never mind dressing, straight out, pick up a ski stick, and break up the fight. If there was a melee, underneath there would be two who were really gripped and you have got to get hold of them and the way to do that is to put your foot on one, on the throat of one, and get hold of the testicles of the other, and pull him off. It was a safety factor. They were your means of getting home. You can't permit the risk of an injured dog. The way they have evolved is most interesting because when they have a fight, they have got the automatic facility that the genitals were withdrawn into the body; they are not hanging free – they go inside. Well that is a very useful facility, isn't it? We humans haven't got that.

[Part 1 0:57:09] Lee: So how do you grab then if they are in a fight?

Powell: Yes, that's a fair point, in that area.

[Part 1 0:57:17] Lee: When you first found yourself having to do that, that was a very alien thing for somebody who normally manages machines to have to do, break up huskies.

Powell: No. I had been in the Air Force and your basic training equips you for all sorts of things.

[Part 1 0:57:34] Lee: Dog fights?

Powell: Well yes but I mean you are 18, you are called up. You have got 3 or 4 months square-bashing. You have got to cope with assault courses. There are lectures on how to manufacture weapons and kill people. You all carried bayonets and you have got to do a lot of bayonet charges. So it puts you in the mind of coping with whatever you have got to cope with.

[Part 1 0:58:08] Lee: It was good all-round training?

Powell: Yes.

[Part 1 0:58:11] Lee: In fact a lot of Fids of that period were ex-Services, weren't they?

Powell: Yes, because 1952, the war had only been over 7 years or so.

[Part 1 0:58:21] Lee: So it was a natural progression?

Powell: So we were all ex-Service and in coping with the duties of being on cook or being gash hand or whatever. Or sorting out the hut. There was that sort of Service attitude of coping with whatever needed to be coped with, as efficiently as possible.

[Part 1 0:58:44] Lee: You had the illustrious Julian Taylor, one of the more famous Antarctic vets, with you for a while at Hope Bay?

Powell: Yes.

[Part 1 0:58:52] Lee: Both seasons or just the one?

Powell: In my second season. He was a dog physiologist, a super vet. He carried out a number of studies on the dogs and had instruments to help him do that, particularly their weight. And then strain gauges in the traces measuring the actual pull, the pounds amount of pulling that they were doing during their runs.

[Part 1 0:59:28] Lee: From my memory of that interview, he was trying to establish the calorie consumption of the dogs, wasn't he, to see how much effort they would produce on what kind of surface.

Powell: Yes, so he needed to know their intake and also their effort. How much work they were doing in pulling the sledge, measuring the load they were pulling.

[Part 1 0:59:53] Lee: Did you ever come across this apparatus he had for collecting the dogs' urine?

Powell: No.

[Part 1 1:00:04] Lee: You didn't have to make that for him?

Powell: No. I had to modify the equipment for measuring their pull.

[Part 1 1:00:15] Lee: In what way and why was that?

Powell: So that it fitted onto the sledge, the handlebars of the sledge. But I don't remember the urine.

[Part 1 1:00:26] Lee: Maybe a more recent scheme?

Powell: Yes.

[Part 1 1:00:31] Lee: Part of his job was to collect urine samples from the dogs. How do you persuade a dog to pee into a bucket?

Powell: I don't know.

[Part 1 1:00:39] Lee: He built a contraption, or somebody built a contraption, rather like a cage, and there was a bucket under a mesh shield floor. You don't recall that?

Powell: No, it must have been after I left, because he was there for two years.

[Part 1 1:00:52] Lee: It sounds like the sort of job you might have got.

Powell: Yes, indeed. It would have been: if it was metal and machinery ...

[Part 1 1:01:03] Lee: You weren't that far away from the Argentinian base, were you, at Hope Bay?

Powell: That's right. It was about three miles, 2-3 miles, the other side of the bay.

[Part 1 1:01:12] Lee: Was there any fraternisation?

Powell: Yes. During the open season it was out of bounds.

[Part 1 1:01:18] Lee: The summer?

Powell: Yes. There was this political confrontation between the Brits and the Argentinians.

[Part 1 1:01:24] Lee: Were you concerned that you might be discovered on each other's camps?

Powell: No. They sent a destroyer into the base sometimes. We wondered whether we would ever be taken prisoner, or something like that, but by and large there was just no contact. But once the ships had gone, they would radio us or would radio them and ask for a cambio session.

[Part 1 1:01:56] Lee: Cambio?

Powell: An exchange session. We would go down. We would take English cigarettes, whisky and we had a couple of crates of unused mustard pickle. We didn't like it but they did, so that was a good bargaining thing. What they had of course, being Argentinians, they had crates of red wine and carcasses of beef which were wonderful after all the corned beef we'd had. So we would have a big cambio session. Then we would agree and we would come back with a sledge loaded with red wine and carcasses. We had evenings or afternoons with them and they had cine film, a standard cine film, which we didn't. So we saw a number of films on their base.

[Part 1 1:02:51] Lee: In Spanish?

Powell: In Spanish? No I can't remember that. They were standard Hollywood films. Three or four of their members had very good English, so we got on like that. But I don't remember about the films.

[Part 1 1:03:13] Lee: Might they have been subtitled?

Powell: They were famous musical films, so you didn't really need to ... I can't remember that. Then they came to us. We would have a formal dinner. Then on one occasion there were about six of them came to dinner: three men and three ladies. The

three ladies, they came with beards, string vests and a bra. That made the evening go; I have got a photograph to show you.

[Part 1 1:03:52] Lee: These were real females? Not men in drag? Am I going to see photographic evidence of this, Ken? [sound of rustling paper].

Powell: Yes.

[Part 1 1:04:06] Lee: Don't worry. It's OK. Take your time.

Powell: There we are.

[Part 1 1:04:17] Lee: Yes. That is very reminiscent of photographs of *It ain't half hot, Mum*, isn't it, or ENSA. Three burly Argentinian men but dressed as ..., they look like they are dressed as Hawaiian women, in grass skirts. Fancy dress in the Antarctic. Did you ever get a Protest Note? Did the powers that be ever interfere?

Powell: We might have done. I think we did in the summer. It was formal and George Marsh must have dealt with it. There was a way of dealing with it, instructions from the Governor on how to deal with it.

[Part 1 1:05:07] Lee: You had to respond with your own Protest Note, I suspect.

Powell: I can't remember.

[Part 1 1:05:13] Lee: One gets the impression that they were giving lip service, but that was as far as it went really.

Powell: Yes. On one occasion the previous year, I think they had fired some shots over the hut.

[Part 1 1:05:26] Lee: They had, yes.

Powell: So it could become quite hostile, but in the open season we just stood off. In the closed season, as I say, there was quite a workable contact. We were quite reserved with them.

[Part 1 1:05:54] Lee: You seemed to have a well-thumbed copy of *Mrs Beaton's Cookbook* on base?

Powell: Yes, that was just ... It was written like an engineering manual. It was very good and whatever she said ... Once in a while, if I was making a cake or something and wanted some self-raising this and that. I think 'Oh I will put a bit more in than she says.' I soon found out that it was best to do exactly as she said, including in the opening of the book she said 'For the cook it is essential that you wear a strong dress and a stout pair of shoes and never delay because an hour lost at the beginning is never regained throughout the day. But wear a good stout dress.'

[Part 1 1:06:52] Lee: They told me how to cut up sides of meat.

Powell: Yes. She had diagrams on how to cut up a carcass of sheep, pig and beef. And when you came with the carcasses that we got from the Argentinians, that was a very valuable drawing because there was a diagram that showed you how to cut it up into the required joints. Once we got a carcass, we dug a hole in the ice and made an ice cave and used it as a deep freeze.

[Part 1 1:07:29] Lee: Right, and kept the dogs away, I guess?

Powell: Kept the dogs away, yes, and so we had a joint on a Saturday night. We always had a rather good dinner on a Saturday night.

[Part 1 1:07:39] Lee: Whose job was it to carve?

Powell: Well it was my job to cut up the carcass but whoever was on cook that week carved the joint.

[Part 1 1:07:48] Lee: OK. Many people have made this point but I have never actually asked why you think the Argentinians had better meat.

Powell: Well because in those days, most of the beef sold in the butchers came from the Argentine. They had this huge production system of beef and the average quality beef on sale in the butchers was almost certainly Argentinian.

[Part 1 1:08:24] Lee: And it was nearer for them as well, wasn't it? Their resource of meat was nearer to the base than ... The supplies had a shorter distance to come.

Powell: For them, yes. They only had to cross the Drake.

[Part 1 1:08:39] Lee: So Saturday nights were bit of a special red letter day, were they?

Powell: Yes. We had a good meal, a good sweet and then sit round the table with our drinks and sit chatting. The amount of alcohol we had; it was an interesting sort of unit. It was three bottles of whisky per man year, three bottles of gin I think, and three, so much rum per man year. We didn't have any drinking on the base. It was one or two evenings and a Saturday evening. Because of course if you'd had 3 or 4 drinks and then you go outside into the cold atmosphere, you would fall over. It was important you had to keep a tight control on alcohol.

[Part 1 1:09:33] Lee: That was Geoff Marsh's job, was it?

Powell: George Marsh, as base leader, yes. But during my two years there, I can honestly say we had no fights, no drunkenness and no homosexual relations. Yet if you listened to the conversation you would think it was nothing but homosexual.

[Part 1 1:09:56] Lee: So George Marsh had a fairly easy year as base commander, that year?

Powell: Yes. He didn't have any confrontations. I don't think he had to read a riot act to anybody.

[Part 1 1:10:09] Lee: It all worked?

Powell: It was quite a harmonious group. It varied. In the summer we had 3 or 4 weeks of 24 hours of daylight and you get tremendous energy. You can do all sorts of things without being tired, whereas in the winter when you have 3 or 4 or 5 weeks of total darkness, you have no energy at all, so that you have to adjust your work accordingly.

[Part 1 0:10:52] Lee: Let's take a break, if you don't mind Ken, and come back and do some more.

Powell: Yes.

[Part 1 1:10:58] [End of Part One]

[Part 2 0:00:00] Lee: This is Ken Powell interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 30th of April 2012. Ken Powell, Part Two.

[Part 2 0:00:09] Lee: Tell me about Duse Bay, Ken, because you were involved in establishing Duse Bay, I think, weren't you?

Powell: Yes. As far as I remember, there was a significant difference in the meteorological conditions and they decided it was important to have a temporary base. This was prefabricated and sent down and then a number of us were relaying the material for the base and the instruments and it was stored at Duse Bay, which was about 20 miles to the south of us, over a peak and down into the next bay. The bay was about 12/15/20 miles wide. You had to cross the bay and then we built the hut on a rock outcrop which was about 20 foot above the sea ice. Murdo Tait and I were given the job of building the hut and setting it up, which we did. It was about 8 foot square, two bunks, a table, chairs and the met instruments. We systematically built the hut, and then stayed on for a fortnight doing met observations and then we were relieved by two other chaps and it was maintained for I think about 4 or 5 months. I don't know whether the meteorological weather proved anything. I never heard anything about that. Then we spent quite a bit of time going along the coast of Duse Bay while we were there.

[Part 2 0:02:20] Lee: Can you describe the hut to me. Was it very very rudimentary?

Powell: Well it was tongue and groove board planking with a flat roof, a sloping roof, and it came in a flat pack. So we just assembled it.

[Part 2 0:02:44] Lee: All the way from the UK?

Powell: I don't know whether it was from Port Stanley. I don't know where it came from but it was pre-made. All we had to do was assemble it, but we were living in a tent while we were doing that. We had the same rations as though we were in a tent and we still had the dogs to look after of course.

[Part 2 0:03:17] Lee: Was it an easy build or, as usual, were there some bits missing?

Powell: No, it was straightforward. It just went up no trouble at all. We carved a groove on the outcrop and levelled it and then built the hut. It was straightforward.

[Part 2 0:03:38] Lee: Were you carving a groove into the rock or ...?

Powell: No, it was a sort of shaley ... It was a rock with a sort of slightly gravelly, rugged ... I think with an ice axe we just levelled it enough for the purpose. Then probably put some wedges under the other end to chock it up, so that it was level.

[Part 2 0:04:06] Lee: Did Duse Bay have its own generators?

Powell: Oh no. It was just as though you were in a tent. Just a primus was the only power, and probably a Tilley lamp. I can't remember but it must have been stayed because of the wind. There must have been hawsers and pickets to stay the hut.

[Part 2 0:04:38] Lee: Tell me about Murdo Tait. What sort of chap was he?

Powell: He was interesting. He was a Scot. He came from Wick, in northern Scotland and for a number of years he had been a lighthouse keeper, particularly on Skerryvore which was one of the islands. In fact one tale he had is: as lighthouse keepers, it was decided that they had to put new lino down and rolls of lino came but it was chequered. It was black and white check – they were about 18" squares in black and white check. But of course they had to lay the lino in this totally circular space and it took them an awful time cut it so that it fitted. Yes, and then he went down to Port Stanley and became a shepherd and it whilst he was working as a shepherd that he applied to Government House and became a Fid and then came down. But he had all sorts of skills that were useful on a base.

[Part 2 0:05:50] Lee: Such as?

Powell: Well splicing and rope work and of course he was quite a good cook because of being a lighthouse keeper and having to cook his own dinners. He always had a great many tales to tell, and I told you that tale of the previous base he had been on. How one of the members, who could send radio signals in Morse, took the sledge radio, climbed onto the roof of the hut and sat over the radio cabin, waited for the wireless operator to come on air, and then sent out this distress signal, apparently coming from the *Queen Mary* which was wedged in the sea ice in the Weddell Sea. This weak signal was carefully transmitted and apparently the wireless operator of the time was taken in and was about to send it off to Port Stanley. Sitting on the roof of the radio cabin was 'the wireless operator from the *Queen Mary*, stuck in the Weddell Sea'.

[Part 2 0:07:12] Lee: Were practical jokes part of everyday life?

Powell: Once or twice, but no not ...

[Part 2 0:07:20] Lee: There was no culture of it? You were with Murdo at Duse Bay, weren't you, when Everest was conquered?



Powell: That's right.

[Part 2 0:07:30] Lee: How did you find out?

Powell: Well the sledge radio could receive the news bulletins from Cape Town in South Africa. We found we could we could get the frequency to get a news bulletin from Cape Town like the Six O'clock News, and it was on that that we heard Hillary and Tenzing had climbed Everest, had conquered Everest. It was quite an event and the other thing that had happened was the Coronation in 1953.

[Part 2 0:08:06] Lee: The same day?

Powell: Yes, the same day. That was it. So as I said, we celebrated the occasion with an extra helping of pemmican.

[Part 2 0:08:15] Lee: By royal appointment?

Powell: Yes.

[Part 2 0:08:18] Lee: The story is that the news of the conquest of Everest was held back for a day or two so it could be announced on the morning of the Coronation. I remember I interviewed John Hunt who led the expedition, many years ago, and he told me that story. You were showing me some of your photographs and one of your photographs actually got into the newspapers?

Powell: Yes. It was a photograph of the *John Biscoe* [sound of rustling paper].

[Part 2 0:08:53] Lee: Ken has quite a wodge of prints here, black and white of course. This is a carpet job. Oh there we are. This is from the *Times*, the 20<sup>th</sup> of May 1955, and there is 'the *John Biscoe*, the Falkland Island Dependencies Survey vessel on her way through the Lemaire Channel to the British base on Argentine Islands. An order has been placed with Fleming and Ferguson Limited of Paisley for a new Survey vessel to take the place of *John Biscoe*, which will be withdrawn from service next year.' That's a remarkable photograph and you must have stood on the ice itself to get that picture.

Powell: Yes. I did. The ship was stationary in the ice and you climbed down the rope ladder and then stood on the ice, and I got £20 for that.

[Part 2 0:09:50] Lee: In 1955?

Powell: In 1955, yes.

[Part 2 0:09:52] Lee: That's a fair price, isn't it? You are not mentioned though. There is no photographer's credit. They wouldn't even credit the journalists in those days either very much, except the famous ones. Well that was an achievement. So presumably when you got back to the UK, did you just print the negative off and sent it to them?

Powell: No. I went to somebody I knew who was called Polar Photos. He was a journalist. He worked for the BBC and as a sideline he had this contract with newspapers.

[Part 2 0:10:32] Lee: We mentioned Julian Taylor, the vet, a while ago and there was quite a concerted breeding programme wasn't there, at Hope Bay?

Powell: So I understand, yes.

[Part 2 0:10:47] Lee: You weren't party to that in any way?

Powell: No.

[Part 2 0:10:49] Lee: OK. What about the other end of the dog's life. What was the fate of the poor dogs who had seen their active service out?

Powell: Well they had to be shot. Again there was a deep crevasse that we earmarked for that. One or two of us, or three of us, would shoot the dog, put a round through its head, put it into the crevasse and then stand in silence for a minute or two in deference.

[Part 2 0:11:22] Lee: It was not a popular job?

Powell: Oh no. Sometimes the injuries from fights could be quite severe. They could tear each other. There were tales from the Eskimos that they used to hang a dog up and extract its molars to stop it severing the towing rope. We had one dog with its stomach ripped open and the intestines trailing and we had to put it down. We had to put an ice axe through its head because we were sledging and we hadn't got a rifle with us. I took a deep breath and then put the ice axe straight through its head, then put it amongst some ice and buried it.

[Part 2 0:12:17] Lee: Not a popular job!

Powell: I mean two years living with 60-70 dogs. They are a major part of your life. A great deal of the conversation is about the dogs. You are cut off from the outside world. News bulletins occasionally. The main event when I was down there was the attack on Suez, but we weren't all that interested. What the dogs were doing was of more interest.

[Part 2 0:12:52] Lee: You felt that detached from the real outside world?

Powell: Yes. Oh yes. No newspapers and the letters from home came in over the radio. Once a month you had a letter from home and sent a letter home.

[Part 2 0:13:09] Lee: Was the remoteness part of the attraction for you, the fact that you weren't bombarded by the rest of the world's goings-on?

Powell: Not specifically on the way down. I didn't go down for that reason. But thinking back, I found that I didn't have any difficulty living out the time. It seemed to go. I wasn't fighting it. I always read a lot. I did a lot of reading down there and the

one book that I seemed to look most to was a collection of poems called *Other Men's Flowers*, published by a famous general, Wavell. He had taken all these poems with him into battle, wherever he was. He had this particular collection of poems and he published it. I used to read that avidly. Obviously there were times when you were fed up with the passing of time but there are two groups of people who are very widely read: Antarctic explorers and prisoners. Chaps who have done time in prison have also read all the books there are about.

[Part 2 0:14:31] Lee: So the library at Hope Bay was adequate, was it?

Powell: Yes. There were the books that we each brought, which we exchanged, and there was a good collection of polar literature. You had time to read through Shackleton and Scott and so on.

[Part 2 0:14:47] Lee: Because you were in huts not dissimilar to those that Scott used and tents not dissimilar to those that other polar explorers had, did you feel connected with them at all?

Powell: Yes, you did feel a connection, and particularly there were members of Scott's party who lived in an ice cave. They lived in an ice cave for quite a few months and the social niceties ... They scored a line in the ice across the cave in the floor of the cave to demark the officers' quarters and the other ranks. They separated because they found they could get on better if they stayed with their own types.

[Part 2 0:15:34] Lee: Gentlemen and Players?

Powell: Yes. Scott and particularly Shackleton was something of a mentor. Going to South Georgia and seeing his grave in ... Have you been to South Georgia?

[Part 2 0:15:50] Lee: No I haven't.

Powell: And there's his grave. After the First World War, in about 1924, he was on another expedition and had a heart attack and died and was buried in South Georgia. There it is. You can go and look at it.

[Part 2 0:16:06] Lee: Did you ever meet any of the chaps from the Heroic Era? Priestley?

Powell: No. I met the famous geologist; he was in the Antarctic dinners<sup>2</sup>. I used to go to the Antarctic dinners until I moved to Lincolnshire and lost touch. There was a famous geologist who was on Shackleton's expedition. In fact he made rather a good speech. He said that since he was the only member of the expedition still alive, and since he had only got one testicle, the expedition isn't in very good shape. [laughter] I know his name but I can't ...<sup>3</sup>.

[Part 2 0:16:54] Lee: I will look it up. Don't worry. Whatever happened to the bath at Hope Bay? Because they delivered one, didn't they?

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<sup>2</sup> Annual dinners of the Antarctic Club.

<sup>3</sup> This could have been Sir James Wordie, the only geologist on Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition.

Powell: In the year before I was there, they delivered it and they were unpacking the bath. The hut is surrounded by compacted snow and ice. They unpacked the bath, put it to one side on the snow, went in and had a cup of tea and a smoke, and whilst they were having their tea a gust of wind got up and it blew the bath away on the snow and glare ice. It just went and it was never seen again. So they solved the problem by making a bath out of a diesel drum. They took a standard diesel drum, cut it in half longitudinally, knocked the two ends out, riveted them together. They put a rubber sheet between the two and then riveted it so that it was watertight, put in on wooden chocks and that was our bath. When we got there, that was what we used. As you sat down, you could feel the ridges in the bath, but it worked. You didn't drain it, you bailed it out. Yes.

[Part 2 0:18:16] Lee: When you bailed the water out, you presumably had a certain amount of time to get it out before it froze?

Powell: Ah well, you would be indoors, you see, in the hut, at the same temperature. You had a bucket and you bailed it out. Then you took the bucket, you put the warm water (as it was) down this special ice well for waste. So that the warm water melted a bit and it got deeper and deeper.

[Part 2 0:18:43] Lee: So the waste got deeper and deeper as well? I see, double ...

Powell: Yes. In this well, when the waste was about 10 foot down or so, after a certain time, you would put a whole mass of ice in and seal it off and then start another one.

[Part 2 0:18:58] Lee: Tell me about the move to Halley, because you were signed up for one year, then two years at Hope Bay. Did you come back in the meantime or did you go straight to Halley?

Powell: No, I came back for a few months. And then I was a friend of George Hemmen. In fact we were sharing a flat in Putney, and the International Geophysical Year and the setting up of the scientific base at Halley came up, and there was an opportunity to be in the Advance Party to help set up the base. So I became the diesel mechanic in the Advance Party. Having got down there, in the Norwegian sealer the *Tottan*, which was about 350 tons, a Norwegian sealer, we patrolled the coast of the Caird Coast, went ashore, did a survey and decided where the hut should be and then David Dalgliesh, the Base Leader, formally took possession of the area in the name of the Queen, as a British territory. Then we took something like 200 tons of stores ashore, sledged them up probably about 2 miles, and built the hut. It was about 100 ft by 40 ft. Yes we built the hut and I installed four generators, wired the hut for lighting and power and it was all ready for when the Main Party of scientists came in a year later.

[Part 2 0:20:48] Lee: So were you there ...? Did you winter at Halley?

Powell: Oh yes.

[Part 2 0:20:53] Lee: So you went one year, worked on the hut over the winter, and then when spring came ...

Powell: Yes, and in fact it was that much colder. I think the lowest temperature was about -46/47.

[Part 2 0:21:06] Lee: Was it just another job, another hut, or was there something particularly special about the fact that it was part of the IGY?

Powell: It really was a standard hut, pretty standard. We had lived in tents while we were building it. It was pretty standard.

[Part 2 0:21:32] Lee: Did you get a sense of history being made though, this particular year?

Powell: Well the fact that it was a new territory, that it was for the International Geophysical Year, gave it a certain sort of eminence. It was on the ice cliff about 80 ft high. Then it was just an ice plateau, but in the distance, on certain days, there was this shadowy ... and we decided it was a mountain range. David Dalgliesh had reported this and looked at it through binoculars, and gave it the name the Tottan Range after the sealer. And it is, it's the Tottan Range. The lights, the aurora in Halley was distinctive.

[Part 2 0:22:30] Lee: In what way?

Powell: Well it was so bright. This great illuminated sky at night was quite fantastic. I mean occasionally we saw it at Hope Bay but it was much more definite at Halley Bay.

[Part 2 0:22:50] Lee: Multi-coloured?

Powell: Oh yes, this great aurora.

[Part 2 0:22:58] Lee: What sort of shapes did it have?

Powell: Well it wasn't like a rainbow. It was like a marbled mosaic.

[Part 2 0:23:13] Lee: Would you spend some time outside, looking at it?

Powell: Yes, we did, anticipated it.

[Part 2 0:23:19] Lee: Every night?

Powell: It came for two or three nights, and then disappeared for quite a long time. We had colour film and took photographs of it.

[Part 2 0:23:31] Lee: So you were in the tents while you built the hut?

Powell: Yes, for six weeks of more.

[Part 2 0:23:37] Lee: Right, and then you moved into the hut itself?

Powell: Yes.

[Part 2 0:23:39] Lee: And then carried on fitting it out from inside?

Powell: Yes.

[Part 2 0:23:41] Lee: But then you came home? You weren't there for the IGY year?

Powell: No. I came home at the end of one year.

[Part 2 0:23:50] Lee: At the end of your year at Halley you also invented a mobile generator?

Powell: Well towards the end of the year we got information over the radio that the incoming party were going to install new generators, larger generators for the scientific work, and I thought 'What's to be done with the existing generators?' So I decided a portable power unit would be useful and I got an old packing crate, which was about 6 ft square by about 8 ft long, mounted this on a rough sledge made of runners, two planks made into runners, with 4"x 2" cross members and a towing loop. Put the packing case on top of that, bolted it in, and then installed one of the diesel generators in the packing crate complete with fuel tank and exhaust pipe and starter handle. Then on the outside of the crate, in a covered box, I put the switchgear and the 13-amp sockets, so that it was quite a portable power unit and it could be towed wherever lighting and power tools were needed. I did that and left it, gave it to the incoming party. I heard later that it was very very well used. It was used for all sorts. Because they had a lot of other buildings to do and while they were doing the building they had a source of power, particularly for the power tools.

[Part 2 0:25:46] Lee: Could it have left base? Could it have gone on a sledging journey?

Powell: Oh no, it needed a tractor and the runners were anything but efficient.

[Part 2 0:26:00] Lee: That was your parting gift, was it?

Powell: Yes.

[Part 2 0:26:04] Lee: On the way back, you spent a little while in the Falklands (both on the way south and north) and you spotted the *SS Great Britain* in its dilapidated state?

Powell: On the way down, one day we had to go round in a very large motorboat (I can't remember the name of it). There was an old hulk, a hull, in the next bay which was used as a depot for stores. We were sent round to collect so many stores from this hull and bring them back to take them down South. It was only afterwards I realised that this hull was in fact the *Great Britain*.

[Part 2 0:26:59] Lee: Interesting story, yes.

Powell: It was complete. We saw it as a sailing ship: two great masts, a steel hull with quite a bit of storage. Yes.

[Part 2 0:27:18] Lee: Let's talk a bit about what you did when you got back. Having spent three years on ice, you then moved into water?

Powell: Yes. I took a short course in surveying because I had been doing that and some meteorological work, some surveying in the Antarctic. So I took a short course in surveying. Then I applied for a job. I found out about the Hydrological Survey of Iraq. There was a consultants just off Victoria Street advertising and I went for an interview. This was to measure the flows of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. I got the job and went out to Iraq. I was stationed in Kirkuk which is about 150 miles north of Baghdad and we worked as a team, measuring the main channels and the tributaries of the Tigris and the Euphrates either by a boat or by a portable cableway. Also, in the winter, we had to go up into the mountains on the Iranian border, up to about the 9000 ft level and measure the water content of the snow, because when it melted in March, that was a contribution to the flooding that could harm Baghdad. This trip, about once every three weeks, once a month, it was quite a long trip up into the mountains and the journey was in three parts: by landrover, on mules, and on skis.

[Part 2 0:29:10] Lee: Were you the only Fid working in Iraq at that time.

Powell: No, there were three others: Brian Gilpin and another one I cannot remember. And the chap who organised it was Mike Mansell-Moulin. He hadn't been down South but we worked as a team and it was very good. It was quite enjoyable and often in remote desert places.

[Part 2 0:29:39] Lee: That desert concept again. They are very attractive aren't they, deserts?

Powell: Yes, well I think being an ex-Fid you are a reliable sort of bloke to be working in these places. There were quite a lot of jobs going for ex-Fids in remote parts of the world just because you have proven yourself to be reliable in isolation.

[Part 2 0:30:03] Lee: You are the only Fid I have met who got married in Baghdad.

Powell: Yes. Whilst I was out there ... I proposed to Jean before I got the job. We were engaged and then this job came up. I said 'Well, if I am going to get married I had better get some money and went out and I was going to come home to get married. But there was quite a lot of work on and they gave me a promotion, but they said 'We can't really spare the time for you to have a month off or whatever.' So we arranged that Jean came out and we were married in the British Embassy in Baghdad.

[Part 2 0:30:44] Lee: How was that?

Powell: Well it was quite interesting because I had two witnesses. The consul carried it out, and in his office there was his desk with a huge Union Jack covering the whole desk, and a Bible in front of him and he conducted the ceremony. Then we went and stayed at a hotel, the Scheherazade I think it was, in Baghdad for a couple of nights, and then we went up into Kurdistan to Shaqlawa in the Landrover, and had out

honeymoon up in the mountains for about ten days. Then came back and I got on. We had a house allocated and I used to go out each day. In the summer when the temperatures were really high, I used to go out about 5 in the morning and finish at 2, workwise and in the kitchen the temperature would be as high as 105 inside.

[Part 2 0:31:59] Lee: Did Jean stay with you for a while then, once you were married?

Powell: She stayed until we left. We were going to stay for something like two or three years, but they had a revolution after about two months. We sat it out for about six months but when the consulate decided to go back home, we thought this was time for us to go. So we left after we were married for about six months. Then we came back home, but they had the revolution. The embassy was blown up and all the records were lost, including our marriage records, so there was only our copy. As soon as we got home, Jean took our copy and went up to Somerset House and we were formally registered.

[Part 2 0:2:55] Lee: When a country is busy having a revolution, do people like you still get paid?

Powell: We did because the consultants that I worked for ... Yes we were paid. In fact we had saved quite a lot of money and the trick was to put it into the branch of my bank in the Channel Islands, in Guernsey. If it stayed in Guernsey for a full tax year, you could bring it back into England without paying any tax on it, which I did.

[Part 2 0:33:32] Lee: Very clever. All right, you beat a retreat from Baghdad and wound up in Middlesex. I can't imagine any greater difference.

Powell: I decided that I wanted to work in the measurement of rivers; that was the sort of work I wanted to do. When I got back we were living in London, in Holland Park, and reading the journals looking for jobs. I got a job with Middlesex County Council as a hydrological surveyor to measure the flow of the rivers of Middlesex and the flood flows, because the design of river channels is based on the 100-year flood flow. I held that for about three years and got a job as a hydrologist to Lincolnshire River Authority, measuring the rivers of Lincolnshire, again particularly flood flows, measuring and analysing the flows. I also had to set up a flood warning operations room to give warning of river and tidal flooding and I had that job for about 23 years.

[Part 2 0:34:56] Lee: So it must be a fascinating occupation, being a hydrologist and studying river flows?

Powell: Well it is because first of all you spend half your time on the river, walking and surveying rivers. It is not a desk job. But also there is a sort of primitive primevalness about it because the river is in charge. The river decides how it is going to flow and as an engineering job, if you worked for an electricity company or water board or a gas board as an engineer, you design the system; you install it; you decide what goes into it and decide the output. Whereas as a river authority, you have already inherited the river which has been there for millions of years. God decides what goes in and the tide decides what comes out. You have a very tenuous control, very tenuous indeed. So you feel humbled.



[Part 2 0:36:10] Lee: So does a river have the same tranquillity and ferocity that you can experience in the Antarctic?

Powell: Oh yes, I mean if you have got a flood on your hands, it's about 5 days and you don't get very much sleep at all. I used to run the operations room and it is very important if you can, to measure the flood because that gives you the design data for the design of the river channel. In Lincolnshire, in the fen, the land level was below high tide level so they had to build great embanked sea defences and you can get certain tides that will overtop these.

[Part 2 0:37:01] Lee: The famous one was Norfolk, wasn't it, in 1952?

Powell: 1953. Lincolnshire in '53. Well what happens is that out in the Atlantic in about a thousand mile diameter, if you have a barometric depression, the water level actually rises about 3 feet. Then if that is followed by a northerly<sup>4</sup> wind, it pushes this hump of water north. Then if the wind changes to the east, it pushes it round the north of Scotland and the top end of the North Sea, and then you get a northerly that pushes it down the North Sea. This is about once every 6 months or so. It's not ... but it happens. But when you think that the width of the North Sea from Scotland to Norway is about 300 miles and then it narrows down to Dover to about 20 miles. As the wind pushes this hump of water down the North Sea, the funnel causes the amplitude to rise. Then you get a happening when it gets to, say, Lincolnshire, the wind has swung round and it's an easterly, it just pushes it on the shore. So you get this huge wave coming over the sea defences. But in 1953 there was also the sea defences during the war had been used for tank training and they had been seriously demolished.

[Part 2 0:39:00] Lee: So the defences were weak?

Powell: Yes, so one of the things that had to be done after that '53 flood was to raise the sea defences to much greater levels.

[Part 2 0:39:11] Lee: Were you making that kind of recommendation in your job?

Powell: In terms of rivers in Lincolnshire, yes. I was measuring waves but somebody else did the design of the sea defences.

[Part 2 0:39:29] Lee: But you were showing the need? You were demonstrating the need?

Powell: No, if it was possible I was just measuring the height of a particular wave. With rivers, I was involved in analysing for flood flows but also for droughts because we had a number of reservoirs and the critical design of a reservoir is that it had got to survive a 3-year drought. So what is the lowest flow in the river to supply the reservoir? So I had to measure droughts as well as floods.

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<sup>4</sup> Some confusion in terminology here. The water will be blown north by a southerly wind (a wind from the south, blowing northwards).

[Part 2 0:40:04] Lee: It sounds like, 25 years later, we still haven't quite mastered it yet.

Powell: Well you never do because it is constantly changing. The rainfall pattern changes and the other thing is that as you get more and more urban areas, the run-off is much greater. You tend to design the river on the worst probably flood once every hundred years.

[Part 2 0:40:32] Lee: In the same way that your army service prepared you for the Antarctic, did your three years in the Antarctic prepare you in any way for your later career?

Powell: Yes because in the Antarctic you tend to be involved in doing Met observations and some surveying and that helped a great deal. And the use of instruments, the philosophy of measurement.

[Part 2 0:41:07] Lee: How do you rate those three years in the 84 years of your life so far, the Antarctic years?

Powell: Well they were quite a turning point because I was 24 when I went down and if I hadn't have gone down, my career would have taken a different direction. I think I would have gone abroad somewhere or other, on some engineering project, but being in the Antarctic, you get a sense that you can cope, so that whatever might happen you get a bit of confidence that you can cope with it. That stays with you. Possibly you may be quite wrong but that feeling: whatever might happen, you will be able to cope with it.

[Part 2 0:42:12] Lee: So it has had a lasting legacy?

Powell: Yes, I think it has.

[Part 2 0:42:15] Lee: In the 60 years that followed?

Powell: Also in planning work, in the Antarctic, certainly when you are sledging, you are balancing your food rations against the number of days you have got. And contingency: you have always got to think of a contingency. When I was designing and planning projects for rivers, this sense of planning and contingency stayed with me. In engineering when you are estimating a project, you have a 5% contingency element where there might be some unknown – the weather, or this or that – but contingency planning in engineering projects is part of it and I think I was influenced to some degree from life in the Antarctic.

[Part 2 0:43:08] Lee: Have you ever yearned to go South again?

Powell: No, no.

[Part 2 0:43:14] Lee: You said that very firmly, Ken.

Powell: Well having left the Antarctic and worked in Iraq and got married, I would have preferred to have gone to other tropical places to work. On the other hand the

prospects seemed best working on the rivers of England. I applied in Australia to go there and I applied on the Mackenzie in Canada. In Canada they wanted hydrological surveys and they wanted somebody who could drive dogs, dog teams, and I thought that would be interesting. I applied and got an acknowledgement and then I got a letter saying 'We apologise. What we hadn't pointed out was that the job is a Civil Service appointment and as it is a Civil Service appointment, you have got to be a Canadian national.' So I didn't get that one. So I stayed in England but I could easily have gone somewhere else; well us together. Then when I was 57 I got this offer of early retirement. I was bowled over – 57! I went home and we did our sums and we only had another year to pay on the mortgage. So we worked it all out and decided to take it. On the other hand, I was due for quite a promotion. But my thinking was based on the fact that I was already well aware that I was out of date. I was behind the times. The computer was making more and more of an inroad and as an engineer I had done all my calculations with a slide rule and log tables. I found that although I used the computer, I didn't really comprehend it and any promotion was going to put me at a disadvantage, so I thought it timely to go. Then about ten of us went in our mid-fifties and late fifties and you thought 'The collective experience that is just going through the door ...' It was a time when the pension funds were really overflowing with money and I think that was what influenced the authorities.

[Part 2 0:45:58] Lee: It has been marvellous talking to you and we will call it a day there.

Powell: Yes, OK.

[Part 2 0:46:03] Lee: Thank you very much indeed.

[Part 2 0:46:05] [End of Part Two]

ENDS

Possible extracts:

- Description of the old *John Biscoe* and her captain. [Part 1 0:11:20]
- Tractors on and off the ship. [Part 1 0:13:54]
- Port Stanley in 1952. [Part 1 0:18:30]
- Some unusual jobs. [Part 1 0:31:48]
- Toilet arrangements at Hope Bay. [Part 1 0:36:33]
- Camping on ice. [Part 1 0:42:24]
- Seals and killer whales. [Part 1 0:47:06]
- The Gangsters dog team. [Part 1 0:48:47]
- Singing to the dogs. [Part 1 0:54:27]
- A 'cambio' session with the Argentinians. [Part 1 1:01:24]
- Mrs Beaton's advice. [Part 1 1:05:54]
- Duse Bay. [Part 2 0:00:09]
- The *Queen Mary* 'stuck in the Weddell Sea'.. [Part 2 0:05:50]
- Shooting dogs. [Part 2 0:10:49]
- Loss of the bath at Hope Bay. [Part 2 0:16:54]
- Invention of a mobile generator. [Part 2 0:23:50]