

JOHN COLLINGS

Edited transcript of a recording of John Collings interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 1st May 2012. BAS Archives AD6/24/1/164. Transcribed by Andy Smith, 23rd March 2019.

Part One

[Part 1 0:00:00] Lee: This is Owen John Collings, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee, on the 1st of May 2012. Owen John Collings, Part 1.

Collings: I am Owen John Collings. I was born 31st of the 5, '28. This month I am 84.

[Part 1 0:00:22] Lee: And where were you born?

Collings: Born in Paignton where I am now living.

[Part 1 0:00:26] Lee: That's Collings with a 'g', isn't it?

Collings: I-N-G-S, yes, that's right.

[Part 1 0:00:30] Lee: What do people call you, Owen or John?

Collings: John, mostly

[Part 1 0:00:34] Lee: Was that the case in FIDS as well?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:00:37] Lee: OK. Tell me about your parents, John.

Collings: Well when I went away to the Falklands in 1955, I had only been there about a month and my father collapsed and died. Of course I couldn't come home in they days¹. I stopped, and then Mother was home here and I came back to Devon and then I was looking at what was the *Daily Herald* paper. They wanted carpenters for the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey.

[Part 1 0:01:27] Lee: Right, we will come to that in a minute. What was your dad's job?

Collings: He was a mason, worked for the Council.

[Part 1 0:01:33] Lee: Did your mother have an occupation?

Collings: No, she was just a housewife.

[Part 1 0:01:39] Lee: And what about your education, John?

¹ Collings speaks with a Devon dialect and that has been used in transcribing his words. The grammar differs somewhat from standard English grammar.

Collings: Well of course I was educated during the war. I went to Hayes Road School which is just up the road in Paignton, and then 1939, I went to the big school, when they declared war.

[Part 1 0:01:59] Lee: Gosh.

Collings: And our school just doubled overnight.

[Part 1 0:02:04] Lee: With evacuees?

Collings: With London evacuees, yes.

[Part 1 0:02:07] Lee: How did you get on with them?

Collings: Oh all right, yes. I mean I was lucky. We had a good crowd there.

[Part 1 0:02:15] Lee: Were you a bright lad?

Collings: Not really, no. I'm afraid my spelling and stuff like that was not up to scratch.

[Part 1 0:02:25] Lee: Neither's mine. How old were you when you left school?

Collings: I think I was just gone fourteen, and lucky enough, there was a man living next door, he had come down from Bristol, and he was a wood machinist for Phillips's Shipyards and he got me down there as a – well I was a boy labourer to start with, but then I went, I done seven years apprenticeship then, as a joiner.

[Part 1 0:02:58] Lee: As a joiner?

Collings: As a ship's joiner, yes.

[Part 1 0:03:00] Lee: Was that a career choice, or just what ...?

Collings: No no, that's what I wanted to do.

[Part 1 0:03:03] Lee: Oh really?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:03:06] Lee: Was that because your dad was in the building trade?

Collings: He was in the building trade, but I just thought 'Well this is what I want to do down here.' I was helping on the machines but then a place came up when I was sixteen to go as an apprentice. I stopped there then. I stopped there.

[Part 1 0:03:28] Lee: So was there something attractive about working with wood?

Collings: Oh yes.

[Part 1 0:03:32] Lee: Can you think what that was?

Collings: Not really, no. I just liked working with my hands. I am better practical than theory, you know? I mean I can't take ... I can talk about that later on but we had lads come down, when we were down South, and they got more money than us because they had a City and Guilds. And they couldn't do the job.

[Part 1 0:04:02] Lee: So an apprenticeship in the shipyards was worth a City and Guilds, was it?

Collings: But they didn't do it in the war, no.

[Part 1 0:04:10] Lee: No? OK, all right. So tell me about going to the Falklands for the first time when your dad was still alive this was, wasn't it? What year was that?

Collings: 1955.

[Part 1 0:04:21] Lee: And you were how old? When was your date of birth again?

Collings: 1928. I was twenty something.

[Part 1 0:04:30] Lee: Twenty seven.

Collings: Twenty seven, was I?

[Part 1 0:04:31] Lee: I think so, yes.

Collings: Well I used to come back on the bus, night times, to Paignton, and look out across ... and I used to think 'One day I would like to go.'

[Part 1 0:04:47] Lee: You were looking out over Torbay, were you?

Collings: Yes, and then, as I say, this advert come up and I went up for my interview.

[Part 1 0:04:47] Lee: Where did you go for an interview?

Collings: Crown Agents, the Colonies, up at London.

[Part 1 0:05:03] Lee: Can you remember much about it? A long time ago.

Collings: It was a long time ago. No, I think the main question was 'What do you want to go for?' or something like that. But I passed the thing and then you are sent for a medical to Harley Street.

[Part 1 0:05:22] Lee: Let me ask you the same question again, then. Why did you want to go to the Falklands?

Collings: Well, I wanted to go abroad and that was ... I never had, as you say, City & Guilds or nothing and they just wanted tradesmen, and I thought 'Well, that's a god opportunity for me to go.'

[Part 1 0:05:39] Lee: No language problem I suppose?

Collings: No language problems there, no. It was very good, because I flew out the first time.

[Part 1 0:05:48] Lee: Yes, but do you remember was the interview difficult or was it just a piece of cake? How was it?

Collings: No, it wasn't too bad at all. I think they were just interested in if you could do the job. Yes, I've got a feeling the man that interviewed me done it when I went for BAS as well, Mr Sloman, I think it was.

[Part 1 0:06:10] Lee: Was it Bill Sloman?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:06:12] Lee: He did both, did he?

Collings: I'm sure he did, because when I went for the BAS interview, the FIDS interview, there was a chap called Eric Salmon, and I knew him from the Falklands, he and his wife.

[Part 1 0:06:25] Lee: Oh I see.

Collings: So we went in and he shook hands.

[Part 1 0:06:28] Lee: So was there a great need of carpenters in the Falklands?

Collings: Yes, there was at the time.

[Part 1 0:06:34] Lee: Because ...?

Collings: They had a lot of work there, and eventually, when I got to the Falklands, there were several there that they sent back home again because they were misfits.

[Part 1 0:06:52] Lee: Yes? In what way?

Collings: Well they wasn't doing their job or they was ... booze was easy to get so it just didn't fit in. It was several got sent home because of it.

[Part 1 0:07:08] Lee: By the Governor?

Collings: Yes, by the Governor.

[Part 1 0:07:12] Lee: And you flew there?

Collings: I flew Air France.

[Part 1 0:07:19] Lee: As far as where?

Collings: They flew to Paris, Paris to Montevideo, and then I waited at Montevideo for a week, and then we boarded the old *Fitzroy*.

[Part 1 0:07:34] Lee: Right. Had you ever flown before?

Collings: No.

[Part 1 0:07:38] Lee: It's quite a baptism, isn't it, to fly all that way?

Collings: Oh yes.

[Part 1 0:07:41] Lee: What was that like.

Collings: Well it was all right. It was the old propeller jobs then, and of course we had trouble. We took off from Madrid (we landed at Madrid) and then had engine trouble there. So we waited and then eventually they took off. And when we got to Rio, we had the same trouble again. We waited. I was sitting on the wing of the plane, and of course it was red hot. You could see it. But anyway we arrived in Montevideo come the end.

[Part 1 0:08:14] Lee: Were you a bit nervous?

Collings: I was , because I thought 'Well this is ...'

[Part 1 0:08:19] Lee: First and last flight?

Collings: Yes. It was Air France, and of course all the crews spoke French. I knew a little bit 'Parler vous Français?' and I said something but that's about all I knew I think.

[Part 1 0:08:36] Lee: It must have taken a day or so, that journey, at least?

Collings: Oh yes, because we went in North Africa and all that. Dakar I think it was, we landed, and then went on to Rio.

[Part 1 0:08:49] Lee: Was there a night in a hotel?

Collings: No. We were on the plane all the time, but no, I enjoyed it. But then, as I say, we had a week ... I landed at Montevideo; nothing there at all.

[Part 1 0:09:04] Lee: Nothing?

Collings: Nobody was there. And eventually somebody ... I said what I was and they said 'Oh, Hotel Pyramides.' That was where I had to stop. And the airport is way outside. And eventually they got me a taxi, and I'm sure we went around Montevideo a couple of times. He knew where he was going. They dropped me at the Pyramides

and then next morning there was a couple of Englishmen there, going down to the Falklands.

[Part 1 0:09:42] Lee: Oh right. OK. So did you sample the night life at all?

Collings: No. Well we went in the bars, but I didn't do nothing when I was there the first time. It was round when we came back a second time, we knew all what was going on. When we came up on a ship to go home.

[Part 1 0:10:04] Lee: The opportunities that Montevideo offers?

Collings: Yes. They used to write it up, what ship was coming in and of course all the girls would know what was coming.

[Part 1 0:10:15] Lee: What was the *Fitzroy* like, in '55?

Collings: Oh my God! We loaded up ... She was at the end of the jetty and you couldn't see her really, but anyway we loaded up and we had a load of Germans on board. They were going down to work in Port Stanley. So we were sleeping on the floor of the cabins to get us all down there. We eventually sailed, and had all the deck cargo and everything, and all the deck cargo broke loose. All the water come in the cabins through the ventilators. We took about five or six days to get there instead of four. It was a terrible trip down.

[Part 1 0:11:09] Lee: Had you sailed before?

Collings: No. It couldn't have been a worse place.

[Part 1 0:11:15] Lee: So you weren't put off by any of this, then?

Collings: Oh no, I was keen to get there. So when we arrived, I was met and took to a lady's house and I stopped there all my time I was there.

[Part 1 0:11:34] Lee: What, in digs?

Collings: In digs with her. And then when I came back, for a second time, I went to live with her again, because I done two tours in Port Stanley.

[Part 1 0:11:47] Lee: Describe Port Stanley to me, in 1955. Was it a sophisticated place?

Collings: Well no, there was nothing much there at all at the time. The only thing: we were used to getting a Navy ship come in the summer, and there used to be one come a bit in the winter. But usually it was just the locals there, and you arranged all the dances, big dances was all. No I enjoyed it. And of course we had badminton clubs and everything and we always used to make proud of us, girls. A gang of us always used to meet up Saturday nights in the dance and enjoy it. And Sunday nights was the cinema.

[Part 1 0:12:33] Lee: Where was that?

Collings: In the Town Hall.

[Part 1 0:12:37] Lee: Just the one night a week?

Collings: One night a week, yes.

[Part 1 0:12:39] Lee: Were they getting modern films?

Collings: Oh yes, they were. We had the Beatles there one night.

[Part 1 0:12:47] Lee: On film?

Collings: Yes on film: *Yellow Submarine* or something it was, and then ... all they years ago.

[Part 1 0:12:52] Lee: *Hard Day's Night*?

Collings: I don't know which one it was. Barred on short. It was the Beatles there. That was just Saturday nights, and of course, come the end, on my second tour – I was there with John Gallsworthy – we both got motorbikes. And they were geared down, and we went out. We knew my landlady's daughter was at Port Louis, so we used to go weekends on the motorbike, out to Port Louis for the weekend.

[Part 1 0:13:30] Lee: What were the roads like?

Collings: There wasn't no roads.

[Part 1 0:13:31] Lee: No roads?

Collings: No, it was just like Dartmoor.

[Part 1 0:13:37] Lee: Rough tracks?

Collings: Oh yes. That's right. Now, of course, they tell me it's all proper roads now.

[Part 1 0:13:44] Lee: So in that first visit to the Falklands, you were being employed by Crown Agents?

Collings: Yes, but then after a while, they see how you fit in, and then you go for Public Works Department.

[Part 1 0:13:57] Lee: Falklands Public Works?

Collings: Yes, and I was lucky that the boss of Public Works Department was a Plymouth man.

[Part 1 0:14:05] Lee: Oh yes?

Collings: And he had two sons. So of course, me coming from Devon as well, I fitted in. Both boys were carpenters and any of the jobs going, like we went to Fox Bay to build a school. Took it down in Port Stanley, a tin place, and put it all up in ... So I went with his son.

[Part 1 0:14:33] Lee: So you were moving a school, were you?

Collings: We moved it. It was like a tin hut, more or less, here, but they wanted a schoolroom in Fox Bay, so we went out there and built it. And then, come towards the end of my three years, I went down to South Georgia for a season, building houses down there.

[Part 1 0:15:00] Lee: So what year were you in South Georgia, then? '58? '59?

Collings: Fifty eight, yes, it must have been.

[Part 1 0:15:07] Lee: Come back to that in just a minute. Were you building houses in the Falklands as well?

Collings: No, we were repairing. We didn't build much. It was repairs and all that, you know. And anything around Government House, we went and done stuff and all that.

[Part 1 0:15:25] Lee: They tended to be wooden buildings, did they?

Collings: The majority were wooden buildings and corrugated iron roofs.

[Part 1 0:15:33] Lee: Did you meet the Governor?

Collings: Oh yes.

[Part 1 0:15:38] Lee: Who was it then? Was it Cosmo?

Collings: Arrowsmith was the second time. No.

[Part 1 0:15:47] Lee: Don't worry. Did you meet him formally? Were you interviewed or was it just a social ...?

Collings: Well he just knew. If you went up there to work, he would ...

[Part 1 0:15:58] Lee: He was informed?

Collings: Yes. But I knew some of the ... well one of the girls there. She was a cook up there. So we used to go up when they had parties up there. Myself and several others used to go up in the cook's place, and what was left, we had.

[Part 1 0:16:20] Lee: What, scraps off the Governor's table?

Collings: Well yes.

[Part 1 0:16:25] Lee: You didn't go to any of the Governor's balls or parties?

Collings: Oh no, I wasn't There is one of our crowd went, a painter went, but he was a Freemason. That's how he got in. And he made such a fool of himself, that was the last time.

[Part 1 0:16:41] Lee: How do you mean?

Collings: He got drunk.

[Part 1 0:16:45] Lee: On free booze?

Collings: Free booze. And he jumped out on somebody, one of the women in the corridor, and it didn't go down very well.

[Part 1 0:16:53] Lee: No, I'm not surprised. Were the Freemasons quite important in the Falklands?

Collings: No. He had it all up in his ... because some of them lived in Nissen huts, and he was in a Nissen hut, living, but he had the thing there, you know.

[Part 1 0:17:09] Lee: His apron?

Collings: Well no, he had a badge and stuff and all.

[Part 1 0:17:14] Lee: His regalia?

Collings: Yes. But we knew that he was a Freemason because we said 'That's how you got made foreman of the painters.'

[Part 1 0:17:23] Lee: But the island wasn't full of the Freemasons?

Collings: Oh no. There might have been some of the big boys had it, but no, never come across it really.

[Part 1 0:17:32] Lee: People say it was a bit like England in the thirties. It was about twenty years behind England.

Collings: Well I don't know. I seemed to find it all right there.

[Part 1 0:17:48] Lee: Did you have electricity?

Collings: Oh yes.

[Part 1 0:17:50] Lee: From gennies?

Collings: Well we had a power station, up at the head of the bay.

[Part 1 0:17:54] Lee: Oh right.

Collings: Oh yes.

[Part 1 0:17:56] Lee: Was that coal fired?

Collings: Oil.

[Part 1 0:17:58] Lee: Oil-fired?

Collings: Yes. And of course all our fires were peat when I was there the first time. Well both times actually were peat. You would cut your own peat.

[Part 1 0:18:10] Lee: So how many carpenters would there be working there? Just you?

Collings: Oh no. I think when I went the first time, there must have been half a dozen or more of us, but they all gradually went home after their time and some were kicked out, as I say.

[Part 1 0:18:29] Lee: But there was enough work? There's about 1500-2000 people?

Collings: Oh yes.

[Part 1 0:18:35] Lee: There was enough work for two or three men was there, carpenters?

Collings: Oh easily, yes. As I say, I was lucky that I went to Fox Bay and all that. Then we spent time, well we spent the whole season down South Georgia, building these houses.

[Part 1 0:18:59] Lee: Were the Falklands a beautiful place?

Collings: Well I thought it was all right. I enjoyed it, yes, because I was quite surprised really; you know when they had the war there, they were getting minus twenties this year. But I was there all these times and I couldn't remember ever getting down to these temperatures. I used to say to my wife 'Well it wasn't like that when I was there.'

[Part 1 0:19:26] Lee: So in your time at Port Stanley, the Falklands, you actually took time off to go to South Georgia, did you?

Collings: No, I was sent down there.

[Part 1 0:19:33] Lee: Right, at the end of the Port Stanley time, or halfway through?

Collings: Partway through. Yes, I had another year or so to do.

[Part 1 0:19:44] Lee: And who sent you, the Crown Agency?

Collings: No, our boss (he was a Plymouth man). These houses had to be put up.

[Part 1 0:19:55] Lee: Can you remember your boss's name?

Collings: Livermore.

[Part 1 0:19:58] Lee: Livermore? OK. And he got word that there was building work to be done on South Georgia?

Collings: Yes, well he was, I suppose, informed by the Crown Agents and then I went down. His son come with me. There was a plumber come. He hadn't come then but he came and went down with us. And there was a mason chap.

[Part 1 0:20:28] Lee: Stone mason?

Collings: Yes, he was there. And that was the four of us.

[Part 1 0:20:37] Lee: Did you volunteer in fact to go or were you just sent?

Collings: Oh yes, I did because, you know, more experience.

[Part 1 0:20:41] Lee: That was several days sea trip, wasn't it?

Collings: About four days, yes.

[Part 1 0:20:47] Lee: What did you make of South Georgia when you got there?

Collings: Oh God, it was terrible.

[Part 1 0:20:50] Lee: Really?

Collings: Well it was just coming out of winter. We lived in the jail actually. There was a jail there but there was no accommodation so we lived in the jail while we were there. It was all right.

[Part 1 0:21:07] Lee: Were they still whaling?

Collings: Oh yes. I have got the eardrums and the teeth when I got down there.

[Part 1 0:21:18] Lee: You've still got them here?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:21:19] Lee: From the whales?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:21:20] Lee: What was it like, the plan, at that time? Was it a messy place, where they ...?

Collings: Where they were cutting them up? Oh no they kept it very good. We were at Grytviken, the Government Point², but we were allowed to go over, walk around and go over and use the slop chest.

[Part 1 0:21:43] Lee: The what?

Collings: Slop chest, they called it. It was a shop where you could buy anything: all the beautiful jumpers, sweets and all the lot.

[Part 1 0:21:52] Lee: Did you have to pay in cash?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:21:55] Lee: English currency?

Collings: Yes it was, well Falkland Island currency

[Part 1 0:21:58] Lee: Pounds, shillings and pence?

Collings: Yes. The Falkland Islands had their own money at the time. And then there was a cinema going all the time when they were whaling, so we went sometimes at night to see it, all free.

[Part 1 0:22:16] Lee: And again, you were doing mainly repair work, were you, to the buildings?

Collings: No no, brand new.

[Part 1 0:22:20] Lee: Brand new houses?

Collings: Oh yes. We had to put the foundations in and these came from – I remember the firm – Nedhams of Manchester. They all came down like a T & G but three or four inches thick.

[Part 1 0:22:36] Lee: Tongue and Groove?

Collings: Yes. Thick they were, three or four inches thick. We erected all the houses and you bolted it down through into the concrete bases.

[Part 1 0:22:48] Lee: That's quite substantial. Was that because of the high winds?

Collings: Oh yes, it was all very good, and I always remember that we boarded it all inside, everything. It really was good. And I put my name up on one of the houses, and many years later I came up again and we called in at South Georgia, and the diesel mechanic was still the same man that was there when I was there. He went up to this house and knocked on the door and a woman answered the door. They allowed women down there with their husbands. 'Mac!' And he said he often asked whose name that was. He said 'He was a man ...'.

² He means King Edward Point. It was the whaling station which was at Grytviken, a short walk away.

[Part 1 0:23:39] Lee: So how did you put the name up? With pencil or ...?

Collings: Yes, I just put it up with a pencil, up on the ceiling boards, up in the loft. I expect it's still there now. We put three houses up down there.

[Part 1 0:23:57] Lee: Just the three?

Collings: Just the three, yes. That's right, yes.

[Part 1 0:24:01] Lee: And were they substantial family homes or little bungalows?

Collings: Oh yes, they were quite decent houses. If you ever go to South Georgia and sail in, on the right hand side, you see the houses.

[Part 1 0:24:14] Lee: Did you know who was going to live in them?

Collings: No, it was for the Met people because they was having their wives down.

[Part 1 0:24:22] Lee: The Met Officers?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:24:23] Lee: Oh right, the Met station.

Collings: Because when I was there, there was just an Irish chap. He was brilliant for forecasting. But there was no women there at all.

[Part 1 0:24:36] Lee: When you see pictures of Grytviken, it's just a jumble of rusting old metal now, isn't it?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:24:43] Lee: Was there any sense of that when you were there?

Collings: Oh no, it was fully operational, yes.

[Part 1 0:24:50] Lee: Did you go to Shackleton's grave?

Collings: Oh yes, I went over there. I have got photographs of it all.

[Part 1 0:24:56] Lee: What sort of state was it in?

Collings: Well it wasn't too bad at the time but I've got a feeling that they did take him up and bury him somewhere else, if I remember. And then whether he was brought back again but I've got a nasty feeling ... I mean he's there now but I'm sure that he was taken up and he was put ... something like that, because there is a cross up on the hill, of him.

[Part 1 0:25:28] Lee: As well as a grave?

Collings: Yes. Whether he died there, I don't know, at that spot.

[Part 1 0:25:36] Lee: Oh I see.

Collings: But it's there. Whether it's still there now ... because it's a long time ago.

[Part 1 0:25:43] Lee: So how long were you on South Georgia for, about?

Collings: We spent six or seven months there.

[Part 1 0:25:48] Lee: Building the three houses?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:25:50] Lee: And then back to Stanley?

Collings: Back to Stanley. I went back to Stanley but the two lads caught a boat from South Georgia back to England. They didn't come back to Port Stanley. I went back and I had another six months or more, to work.

[Part 1 0:26:11] Lee: You were in South Georgia when the *Tottan* sailed in. Is that right?

Collings: Yes, for the Trans Antarctic. That was when I was down there.

[Part 1 0:26:18] Lee: Oh right. You saw it yourself, did you?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:26:20] Lee: Did you meet any of the people on board?

Collings: No, not really, no. But I've got, in my collection somewhere, I've got all the stamps, stamped 'Trans Antarctic'. South Georgia stamps the day that it finished.

[Part 1 0:26:33] Lee: Was there quite a lot of people coming and going in South Georgia in those days?

Collings: Well not really, no. There was only just the whaling people there, the ships that were coming in for that. There was no tours, or nothing like that. Sometimes we'd have a day off and they would take us over to Stromness and the other places. But the majority of the time we worked seven days a week.

[Part 1 0:27:03] Lee: Were there ships calling in on a regular basis?

Collings: Well there was ships coming in there, to pick up the guano and all that.

[Part 1 0:27:12] Lee: Fertiliser?

Collings: Yes. In fact, when I left Montevideo once, there was a Royal Mail liner³. Whether she is still there now ... but she was sunk in the harbour, full of guano, in Montevideo. And they always said it was a swindle, but we never heard ...

[Part 1 0:27:43] Lee: How do you mean?

Collings: Well she went down in the harbour, and we argued, as you do with all this chit-chat ...

[Part 1 0:27:50] Lee: Insurance job, you mean?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:27:54] Lee: What was a mail ship doing ...?

Collings: Well they sold them off, the old Royal Mail Lines, because it was quite an expensive cargo then.

[Part 1 0:28:07] Lee: I gather the smell is quite strong.

Collings: Well not too bad. You got used to it. People have said 'When you are getting near South Georgia, you can smell it' but whether it was me, I don't know, but I got used to it.

[Part 1 0:28:19] Lee: But then your father passed away and you came home?

Collings: No, I never come home.

[Part 1 0:28:24] Lee: Oh you didn't come home?

Collings: No. I stopped, another three years or more, by the time I come home again.

[Part 1 0:28:39] Lee: So let me get my geography right, then. What year did your father die?

Collings: '55, when I went away, in the beginning ...

[Part 1 0:28:49] Lee: But then you did come home for a bit, in the late fifties?

Collings: I came home in '58/'59 and then I went back, down to the Antarctic, Deception Island, 1960.

[Part 1 0:29:04] Lee: So what did you do with those, year and a half or so you had at home?

Collings: Well I worked for some firms.

³ This would have been the *Highland Chieftain*, sunk in March 1960, see www.submerged.co.uk/montevideo-chieftain

[Part 1 0:29:13] Lee: Anybody that would have you?

Collings: Yes, that's right.

[Part 1 0:29:16] Lee: But you were itching to go South again, were you?

Collings: Well yes. That's when I saw the advert.

[Part 1 0:29:20] Lee: In the *Herald*?

Collings: I thought 'Right'. And unfortunately, when I went for the interview, I was limping because somebody had knocked me off my motorbike. There was four carpenters at the time, going. Three went to Halley Bay and I was sent to Deception. And then I thought they would fail me, but they didn't and I went to Deception and they went to Halley Bay.

[Part 1 0:29:55] Lee: How did you get ...? This was in nineteen sixty ...?

Collings: Nineteen sixty it was, I think. That's when we left: October 1960.

[Part 1 0:30:03] Lee: That was the very end of 1960? December sometime?

Collings: October we left then, from Southampton, and then we sailed down. We went Tristan da Cunha. We had an agricultural minister and his family, and they were going to live in Tristan. So we sailed into Tristan and spent a week there, unloading. It was very interesting because our ship, the *Shackleton*, was red and it was at the time that the Yanks had put the first man up in space, and we were buzzed by the big American planes. We were told afterwards they thought we were Russian, because this chap was coming down in the area.

[Part 1 0:30:54] Lee: He was re-entering?

Collings: Re-entering, and he was coming down in that area. I forget the name of him, who he was.

[Part 1 0:31:00] Lee: John Glenn?

Collings: Yes, I think it was⁴.

[Part 1 0:31:02] Lee: I've met him.

Collings: Have you?

[Part 1 0:31:04] Lee: Yes.

Collings: I'm sure that's who it was.

⁴ Glenn's flight, the first American orbital space flight was in February 1962, so the dates are inconsistent.

[Part 1 0:31:07] Lee: It would have been, yes. The first American, not Gagarin the Russian?

Collings: No it was an American because they buzzed us and somebody said 'Well they think we are a red ship, Russian.' But we were at Ascension Island then, but we still had to go to Tristan which took several days. No, a couple of days more to get to Tristan.

[Part 1 0:31:28] Lee: What was the *Shackleton* like?

Collings: All right, yes. But we only had about nine what we called Fids on board. So we used to steer the ship while the crew done all the work, and then we used to do the echo-sounder, because they towed what they called 'the Fish' behind them, and we were doing that for echo-sounding night-times and all, 24 hours a day.

[Part 1 0:32:00] Lee: Depth sounding?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:32:02] Lee: What, in the middle of the ocean or along the ...

Collings: Oh yes, towing, right in the middle of the ocean, yes.

[Part 1 0:32:07] Lee: Can you remember what sort of figures you were getting?

Collings: Not really, but I know one ridge, it came right up.

[Part 1 0:32:14] Lee: A ridge?

Collings: Yes, and down.

[Part 1 0:32:18] Lee: And the first place you were going to go to after Stanley was Deception?

Collings: Deception Island, that's right.

[Part 1 0:32:24] Lee: What did you make of that?

Collings: Well of course we got in in November I think it was. I thought 'Well this is it.' I mean I was keen to get ... So we got ashore and saw where we had to sleep and all this lot, but I quite enjoyed it there.

[Part 1 0:32:46] Lee: You weren't there very long were you?

Collings: I was in all summer.

[Part 1 0:32:50] Lee: Oh you were there all summer?

Collings: Well I built a diesel shed.

[Part 1 0:32:53] Lee: Did you?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:32:55] Lee: Out of wood?

Collings: Well it came down, in to us; it was unloaded. It had been there I think ... Whether it was the year before I got there, I don't know. But any how we had to ... I think it is still there now because I've seen photographs. It survived the thing.

[Part 1 0:33:15] Lee: The eruption?

Collings: But we had to dig down through the permafrost to put the piers in for it, and the *Shackleton* had two big diesel engines for us, and they were dumped on the beach, and we had to get them up, up over the beach. Then we had to ... I had to take a pattern of the bottoms and make the beds of the engines before I done anything else. And then there was two steel erectors down there, Ben Hodges and another chap⁵, and they rigged up a sheerlegs.

[Part 1 0:33:55] Lee: A what?

Collings: Sheerlegs, to lift the engines, and they lifted them up and dropped them on the things I had made and then I could get on with building the hut.

[Part 1 0:34:10] Lee: Did you get to know Ben Hodges well?

Collings: Oh yes, Ben, yes.

[Part 1 0:34:14] Lee: What did you make of him?

Collings: Oh he was all right. Of course, seeing as smokes were free, he started smoking and he's never stopped that way. Yes, old Ben. But (who was I talking to?) the gentleman who came to see me, phoned me before you came ...

[Part 1 0:34:34] Lee: Allan Wearden.

Collings: He said that Ben has gone a bit ... what do you called it?

[Part 1 0:34:40] Lee: Forgetful?

Collings: No, what's that they call, instead of forgetful?

[Part 1 0:34:44] Lee: Alzheimer's?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:34:46] Lee: Has he? I interviewed him, it would be about three years ago now, I think, three or four years ago. He was fine.

⁵ Pete Secker, according to Ben Hodges' oral history interview.

Collings: Yes, because he came there with another chap, we called him the Ragged Count, and they built the hangar, the hangar for the aircraft, but they stopped doing that, because we had no ... the engines were all assembled. So if at the end Ben had gone, then we'd have done it.

[Part 1 0:35:21] Lee: So you and Ben had to get they generators off the beach?

Collings: Well everybody on the base, the pilots, the aircrews, everybody. And we had a tractor and we towed them up on rollers, all up across, until we got to where I would have built the shed, and then they lifted them up one at a time onto the ... job done and over.

[Part 1 0:35:50] Lee: So they were quite substantial generators, were they?

Collings: Oh yes, big Listers. Real big Listers, yes. It all went well and I spent the summer there really, and I think I would have wintered actually but I think a thing came from Hope Bay, that they wanted one man for the sledging parties. So Killingbeck volunteered himself and they said 'No, you are the base commander.' So I said 'I'll go.' So they flew me over.

[Part 1 0:36:37] Lee: What was the attraction, of going to ...?

Collings: Well I just wanted to, while I was down there, try dog sledging. So I was flown over after all the ships had gone.

[Part 1 0:6:51] Lee: Flown over to ...?

Collings: Hope Bay.

[Part 1 0:36:53] Lee: Hope Bay? Yes, OK. And I think I know who the pilot was there, didn't I? Ron Lord?

Collings: Ron Lord or else it could have been ... there was Paddy English there as well at the time. One of they was ..., flew me over. I think it must have been Ron Lord actually, that flew me over.

[Part 1 0:37:12] Lee: So were you keen to ...? Were you keen to leave Deception or just keen to something new?

Collings: To see something new while I was there.

[Part 1 0:37:18] Lee: How do you compare the base you saw at Deception, with the base you saw at Hope Bay?

Collings: Oh well of course Hope Bay was a sledging base and that is entirely different.

[Part 1 0:37:28] Lee: In what way?

Collings: Everybody was in and out all the time, and you always had the dogs there, nearly a hundred dogs there.

[Part 1 0:37:37] Lee: Was it bigger or smaller than Deception?

Collings: I think the hut might have been about the same. No I think Deception was an old whalers' hut, so that was quite big. But we slept in double bunks on Hope Bay. No, I rather liked Hope Bay.

[Part 1 0:38:03] Lee: And that was where you met Golly (John Gallsworthy)?

Collings: No. The first time I met Golly was Port Stanley.

[Part 1 0:38:10] Lee: On the first occasion? Second occasion?

Collings: Second occasion.

[Part 1 0:38:14] Lee: Second time. I beg your pardon. OK. So then you went off to Hope Bay, at the end of that first summer on Deception.

Collings: Yes, I wintered at Hope Bay and I done some sledging. I went out with a geologist the first time, just me and him, and I think we got caught up ... We camped one night and everything went out. All the sea ice broke up.

[Part 1 0:38:47] Lee: You were camped on the sea ice, were you?

Collings: Well no. He knew better. We camped on the land but we had to go back then because we didn't know if our ... And we came back to base.

[Part 1 0:38:59] Lee: So you couldn't continue the trip because the ice had gone?

Collings: No, and then it was found out that I had housemaid's knee, believe it or not. And I went down to the Argentine ... there's an Argentine Army base next door, and he give me something for it. And eventually I went out again with another geologist and a doctor. We were out about – it must have been about a couple of months. It might have been more than that, sledging.

[Part 1 0:39:28] Lee: Did you take to that kind of work?

Collings: Oh yes, I liked it.

[Part 1 0:39:32] Lee: Why was that?

Collings: Well I don't know, I just ... I had a job to ski, mind you, but no, I found it very good. Yes, I rather enjoyed it.

[Part 1 0:39:44] Lee: Were you working with the dogs yourself? Were you ...?

Collings: No, because each man had a team but I didn't have a team. So I was like what they call a Gash Hand.

[Part 1 0:39:53] Lee: Can you remember the name of the team of dogs? It doesn't matter if you can't.

Collings: No, I can't. Oh we had the Ladies, but I don't think I went out with the Ladies. I can't think, no. No, I can't remember, because we had several teams there.

[Part 1 0:40:19] Lee: So they were doing these trips out for geological purposes, rather than surveying?

Collings: Oh yes. The second time I went out, we went down to Cape Longing, or somewhere. They found this like big hole in the ground. They took it off, took all the things ... I think if I look through my stuff, they sent me a thing of it.

[Part 1 0:40:45] Lee: When you say a big hole in the ground, ...?

Collings: Well it was like an ice hole, and he was very interested in that. It was down somewhere near Cape Longing, it was called.

[Part 1 0:40:55] Lee: So he was taking rock samples from this ice hole, was he?

Collings: Oh yes, and all this stuff. And then of course our radio packed up and we could hear they, you know the Morse key (because it was Morse key then) and they couldn't hear us. We found out, come the end, that if we'd have been a few more days, they would have classed us as missing because they couldn't get in touch with us.

[Part 1 0:41:25] Lee: So the radios weren't very reliable in those days?

Collings: No, but we went back up again, coming back to base, and Aitkenhead (he was called), the geologist, he knew where the dumps were. There was dumps all laid out.

[Part 1 0:41:41] Lee: Depots?

Collings: Depots.

[Part 1 0:41:42] Lee: It was Neil Aitkenhead, was it?

Collings: Yes, Neil, and he knew where it was and we got in touch with them, to say we were still here.

[Part 1 0:41:52] Lee: Oh right, so you found a radio in one of the depots?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:41:56] Lee: It still worked?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:41:58] Lee: Gosh.

Collings: And of course I went out with: there was Doctor Catty, Neil and myself. Yes, three of us.

[Part 1 0:42:08] Lee: There can't have been an awful lot of carpentry work to do at Hope Bay.

Collings: Oh no, there wasn't, none at all, but they just wanted a man.

[Part 1 0:42:17] Lee: Right.

Collings: I done little bits and pieces but I went there specially as what we called a Gash Hand, really then, yes.

[Part 1 0:42:43] Lee: I suppose there's always sledges to repair, were there?

Collings: Oh no no. Nothing like that, no. I might have done a little bit of shelving and stuff, but nothing much. I just worked you know, done a day at cook and all this stuff and everything, yes.

[Part 1 0:42:46] Lee: Who was on base with you at Hope Bay?

Collings: Neil Fothergill⁶ was the Base Commander. We had a diesel mechanic which never left base, George somebody⁷ from Bristol. I can't remember the other lads that was there. But they are still alive I think because I have seen their name mentioned in the BAS reunions because I think one of them was in Canada. I can't think of their names.

[Part 1 0:43:21] Lee: Hold on a second; I'll just ... I can look it up for you. Ian Fothergill, Aitkenhead we talked about already.

Collings: Yes, and who was the other geologist? It went out the window.

[Part 1 0:43:34] Lee: Nelson?

Collings: Yes, Neilson⁸ yes, that's right. I remember him. That's right.

[Part 1 0:43:42] Lee: And then the Medical Officer was somebody called Catty.

Collings: Yes, that's right, Dr Catty. I went out with him. There was me, Neil Aitkenhead and him for the couple of months trip down.

[Part 1 0:43:53] Lee: OK. The diesel mechanic was somebody called White.

⁶ Actually it was Ian Fothergill, according to BAS Archives.

⁷ George White.

⁸ Phil Nelson.

Collings: Yes, George White from Bristol.

[Part 1 0:43:59] Lee: And a few Met men: J Winham and RG Wright

Collings: Yes, that's right.

[Part 1 0:44:05] Lee: And a couple of surveyors: Edwards and Harbour.

Collings: Oh yes, Harbour, yes.

[Part 1 0:44:09] Lee: And somebody called Downham, a GA.

Collings: That's right, and he is in Canada now.

[Part 1 0:44:13] Lee: And then some chap called Collings, builder.

Collings: Me. That's right, yes.

[Part 1 0:44:18] Lee: Did you all get on OK?

Collings: Oh yes, got on wonderful.

[Part 1 0:44:22] Lee: There was never any bother or ...?

Collings: No problems at all. There has only been one base, where I was at Adelaide in later years, a chap was a so-and-so, and the base commander got him sent home for his second year. He wasn't no good to the base.

[Part 1 0:44:47] Lee: Do you remember any extreme weather whilst you were there?

Collings: At Hope Bay?

[Part 1 0:44:51] Lee: Yes.

Collings: Oh yes. It used to get very windy there, and everybody was off base except me and George White, and of course we had to feed the dogs that was left, every day. And we actually started, this particular day, to feed them. Then the wind got up and we just had to lie down in the sledge when ... because we were pulling it around.

[Part 1 0:45:22] Lee: You were off base yourself, were you?

Collings: No, we were on base but we were feeding the dogs that were left there.

[Part 1 0:45:28] Lee: You were using a sledge to get the food round.

Collings: Yes, just pulling around the base. Anyhow it just disappeared and we crawled back to the hut and when we looked at the Met gear inside, it had gone up a hundred knots.

[Part 1 0:45:45] Lee: Gosh, that was quite sudden, was it?

Collings: Yes, but it was very windy at Hope Bay.

[Part 1 0:45:51] Lee: Did you have any other close calls?

Collings: I think once we were at Deception Island, that's right, and we went out in the boats one night. Now where did we go? Anyway we were out in the boats and we were coming back to base, several of us in the boat, and one of the Chilean boats, tugs, came out and nearly run us down. It didn't stop. Whether he didn't see us or what, I don't know but we felt 'Crikey, that's another life gone.'

[Part 1 0:46:38] Lee: In your carpentry work, normally if you are working in this country, you are a carpenter, you would have a foreman who was looking at your work and making sure you were doing an good job. And there was a certain amount of opportunity to show pride in your work. In the Falklands and in particular the Antarctic, you probably didn't have all the tools and the raw materials you would like, and I wonder whether you were able to maintain pride in your work.

Collings: Oh yes. All the huts came down ...

[Part 1 0:47:09] Lee: Pre-fabs were they?

Collings: No, it wasn't pre-fabs; it was all in bits, but it had all been made sure it was there. When I went to Stonington, I made a diesel shed in Port Stanley for Stonington, so I knew that was all right.

[Part 1 0:47:32] Lee: So you'd made it, put it together, then taken it apart again?

Collings: Taken it apart again. That was for Stonington Island. But the one at Deception was massive. It really was massive, and I done most of that myself.

[Part 1 0:47:53] Lee: And so when you were building the houses on South Georgia, would that have been from scratch, or would that also be kit, if you like?

Collings: It was kits, but we had to put the foundations in and put everything as it should be, because you put the bolts right down through. And when it was what you call second fix, the electricity was what they called an Octopus system. It was put, a big box with all the wires on, was put up in the loft. And each wire was named and it came down through the partitions. And it was all the boy Livermore, he done it all, wired it all up.

[Part 1 0:48:42] Lee: So you were proud of the houses you ... You could have done one yourself could you?

Collings: Oh yes, it was very good. It was very good. They always had good stuff down the Antarctic.

[Part 1 0:48:59] Lee: How well built was the hut at Hope Bay? You must have cast a professional eye over it, I guess.

Collings: No there was nothing wrong with it. I mean it was ... We had all big wires over them, to keep it down from the wind.

[Part 1 0:49:11] Lee: Hawsers?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:49:13] Lee: But the woodwork was OK, was it, the carpentry?

Collings: Oh yes everything ... yes it was. Most of the work ... Nowadays they got firms down there doing it, which is a shame really, because we done it all before.

[Part 1 0:49:31] Lee: At the end of your year at Hope Bay, were you offered a second year, or did you have to make a decision?

Collings: No. The funny thing was that we had a radio message from the Governor of the Falkland Islands, Arrowsmith he was called. He said that 'When you come back, Collings, come to see me.' So when I went back to Port Stanley, he offered me another three years working for the Public Works Department. That's when I met Golly.

[Part 1 0:50:07] Lee: So you just had the one year in the Antarctic as such?

Collings: Well the first time I went down, I went down for what they call a winter and two summers. And then I went back to Port Stanley for another three and a half years. That's when I met Golly.

[Part 1 0:50:25] Lee: Then you went South again after that?

Collings: Yes, That's right.

[Part 1 0:50:29] Lee: I have got a note here from John Gallsworthy about meeting you. He says 'I first met John in late '62.' And you worked together quite a bit and you were known as the 'Two Johns'.

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:50:47] Lee: Where did that come from?

Collings: Well we were always out together at night.

[Part 1 0:50:51] Lee: Oh I see.

Collings: We played in the darts, played badminton. If we ever went out drinking sometimes, if they just saw one, they'd think 'Where's the other one?' And one of the girls used to run dances there. So we always run the cloakrooms. And then there was all the theatre stuff, like the Workman's Club had a fancy dress ball every year. We done all the scenery and all the stuff, it was always me and John.

[Part 1 0:51:29] Lee: Did you do any acting or did you just ...?

Collings: I didn't do any acting but the Met people were very good at it.

[Part 1 0:51:37] Lee: You made the scenery for the dramatic society?

Collings: Oh yes.

[Part 1 0:51:40] Lee: 'And for time to time we also helped a group called the Five Bs, running dances; that's when we were cloakroom attendants.'

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:51:48] Lee: And John (that's you) 'was a very keen ballroom dancer'.

Collings: Yes. I had all my medals.

[Part 1 0:51:54] Lee: Did you?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:51:59] Lee: Were there dances every week?

Collings: Not every week, no. Sometimes, if there was a ship in, they might have one, but usually it was just the big dances every so many ..., during the winter like you know. Like the beauty queen or whatever you called her, and all this stuff and eventually I got treasurer at the Working Men's Club. So that landed with me for all the time I was there. And it was surprising, just for a little small place, what money we turned over.

[Part 1 0:52:34] Lee: What were you raising money for?

Collings: Just to keep the place going, a working men's club and all that, yes.

[Part 1 0:52:44] Lee: 'We played badminton.'

Collings: Oh yes.

[Part 1 0:52:47] Lee: In the same town hall?

Collings: No, in the gym.

[Part 1 0:52:49] Lee: Oh right.

Collings: Yes, the town hall was used for the dancing but there was a gym alongside it where we played badminton.

[Part 1 0:52:28] Lee: And darts, that was in the pubs I guess, was it?

Collings: That was in the pubs, yes.

[Part 1 0:53:01] Lee: Working Men's Darts team?

Collings: Yes yes.

[Part 1 0:53:03] Lee: Did you win much?

Collings: No. Had good nights out but ...

[Part 1 0:53:10] Lee: 'Remind John about setting an alarm clock for three hundred hours under a bed, Don and Phil's bed.'

Collings: Oh, I can't remember that.

[Part 1 0:53:23] Lee: Can't you?

Collings: No.

[Part 1 0:53:25] Lee: It sounds like a practical joke.

Collings: Yes. It must have been, yes.

[Part 1 0:53:27] Lee: 'Also apple-pieing a young lady's bed whilst working in her parents' house.'

Collings: Oh, Elaine, I expect. Yes, I was keen on Elaine.

[Part 1 0:53:41] Lee: Were you?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:53:43] Lee: So you were showing your affection by apple-pieing her bed, were you?

Collings: Yes. She eventually came back to England. Yes, I was very ... I got on well with her mother and father, yes Elaine.

[Part 1 0:53:56] Lee: 'Remind him of the winter with Iona and Eileen.'

Collings: Yes, He went with Iona and I went with Eileen.

[Part 1 0:54:02] Lee: Oh, did you?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:54:04] Lee: 'We drank too much.' Is that true?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 0:54:06] Lee: OK. Whatever happened to them?

Collings: I think they both went to Australia.

[Part 1 0:54:12] Lee: They were that keen on you, they went to Australia?

Collings: Oh no, it was a thing that we were company for each other in the winter, and when the ships come in, they used to hang around with the Navy. But they could drink us under the table, they honestly could.

[Part 1 0:54:30] Lee: Is that what all Falkland girls were like, was it?

Collings: Well these two were, yes.

[Part 1 0:54:38] Lee: 'When the time came to leave Stanley after three and a half years, we stood on the *Darwin* and said with real feeling "We bet there have not been two blokes so sorry to leave."' So what was it about the Falklands that made you feel so at home there?

Collings: I don't know if it was the freedom or everything. Everybody knew everybody. It was a good way of life for us. We done our work. We had a foreman. One year we had a man that was ... he'd worked with natives. He was the ... (oh that might be my wife just coming in); he came as Superintendent of Public Works and he'd been out in Africa working. So he still had that attitude that we were blacks. That's what he was thinking. Myself and John and the foreman, we were sent out to Ajax Bay. That's where the Falklands landed when they had the war. The hospital was at Ajax Bay. We were sent out there to take all the houses and everything down, to bring back to Port Stanley.

[Part 1 0:56:09] Lee: For raw materials?

Collings: Yes. We took them all down, marked it all and we erected them back in Port Stanley. And he was a right so-and-so. Anyway we were up there working, me and John and a labourer, and he come up and he ranted and raved 'You two so-and-sos. Just out of practice could do more than you two.' So anyhow he took John away. I stuck me heels in and eventually I got a labourer to help me. And then we always got all the dirty jobs, myself and John. We re-ironed the whole aircraft hangar in the winter. Should have done it in the summer but we done it in the winter. He was a right little fellow.

[Part 1 0:57:09] Lee: Being quite a qualified carpenter by then, did you not mind doing other, less skilful work?

Collings: No no, that was all part of it. The roofs were all part of it, you see. I mean the big school there, we done all that, the felt roof and tiles, so that was all part of our job. There was no demarcation out there.

[Part 1 0:57:34] Lee: Right, you all mucked in.

Collings: You all mucked in.

[Part 1 0:57:38] Lee: OK. So after three and a half years, what happened? Did John Gallsworthy go north and you went south? Is that right?

Collings: I came home.

[Part 1 0:57:51] Lee: Oh you came home?

Collings: Yes, I came home. John went up on the boat and then he went up with the missionaries in Argentina. And I went back to England because I was coming back to get married in the Falklands.

[Part 1 0:58:20] Lee: That sounds Irish to me.

Collings: Well I flew back to England.

[Part 1 0:58:29] Lee: To pick up the wife?

Collings: No, the wife was a Falkland girl.

[Part 1 0:58:32] Lee: Oh right, I see.

Collings: So I was coming back. I had my job secured, coming back to the Falklands.

[Part 1 0:58:38] Lee: Right, so if you are going to marry, what's your wife's name?

Collings: She was called, the girl ... not this one; another one.

[Part 1 0:58:47] Lee: Previous wife?

Collings: Yes. Well I didn't marry her.

[Part 1 0:58:50] Lee: Oh you didn't?

Collings: Oh no. Everything was arranged, We had the house, everything. I dug me peat. When I come back to England, I got the Dear John, didn't I?

[Part 1 0:59:04] Lee: Oh no.

Collings: So I had to go back because I had to sign the contract.

[Part 1 0:59:09] Lee: For the next year's work?

Collings: Well, for the next three and half years, so I went back to the Falklands and they all knew everybody's business there. And Ted Clapp was the boss of BAS in Stanley. And I resigned my work from the Public Works Department and Ted took me on for the Antarctic again.

[Part 1 0:59:40] Lee: Right, so were you joining the Foreign Legion, so to speak, to forget.

Collings: Well not really, because she was a bit of a doings as it turned out.

[Part 1 0:59:52] Lee: There's one thing I forgot to ask you about Stanley before we go back down South again. There was an Argentinian aircraft landed one day. Tell me the story as you know it.

Collings: Well it was around dinner time. Prior to that, there had been an American four-engine plane come over, which was very unusual. Anyway this was dinner time. I think we might have been going over for dinner, and this plane came down very low, and we all said 'That will never land.' And of course it landed on our racecourse. It sunk right in. So immediately some people went up and they opened the door and took them as hostage.

[Part 1 1:00:42] Lee: What year would this be, roughly?

Collings: Oh, when I went down the second time.

[Part 1 1:00:49] Lee: Early sixties?

Collings: John was there as well.

[Part 1 1:00:50] Lee: Early sixties?

Collings: Yes. John was there.

[Part 1 1:00:52] Lee: So they took them out of the plane?

Collings: They put them in the plane, because the leader of the revolt, as they called it, was a blonde girl. The plane was full but she was ... They was all armed. There was a little Marine garrison there, but every man was given a rifle, including myself, John, and we formed a ring around the plane.

[Part 1 1:01:24] Lee: So who was in the plane? This was a group of terrorists was it, or ...?

Collings: Yes. I think that was the start of trying to do the invasion actually, years ago, just to try it out. But anyhow we ringed the plane, night and day it was.

[Part 1 1:01:45] Lee: How long?

Collings: And they said that if they come outside the ring, shoot them to kill them, they told us.

[Part 1 1:01:51] Lee: So a group landed a plane on the racecourse?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 1:01:55] Lee: How many of them?

Collings: I think it must have been about twenty-odd, and eventually they must have talked them out of it and they surrendered. And I think the Argentine ships come in and took them away.

[Part 1 1:02:10] Lee: So do you think they were representing the Argentinian government, or were they...?

Collings: Well it was to do ... they were representing Peron but he was dead then wasn't he? He was dead and that's what it was. But they took them away and we all said 'They will never get this plane to take off.' But they stripped her out and she took off. So I think they used to say: when it all happened, years later, someone said 'Well that could have been a trial run.'

[Part 1 1:02:50] Lee: Were any shots fired?

Collings: No, no shots were fired at all but we all had ammunition.

[Part 1 1:02:57] Lee: Was it tense, a tense atmosphere?

Collings: Oh yes, because ... I have got a photograph somewhere, of us all laid out around the plane, all the .303s, the old Enfields.

[Part 1 1:03:21] Lee: Let's pause for a moment. We will come back.

Collings: Yes.

[Part 1 1:03:24] [End of Part One]

Part Two

[Part 2 0:00:00] Lee: This is Owen John Collings, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee, on the 1st of May 2012. Owen John Collings, Part 2.

[Part 2 0:00:11] Lee: So we got to the point in your story, John, where you decided to leave the Falklands and head South again.

Collings: Yes

[Part 2 0:00:18] Lee: I guess you had to resign, did you?

Collings: Yes, I had to resign and I had to pay my airfare and everything else, to square up.

[Part 2 0:00:31] Lee: To go from where to where?

Collings: From England to the Falklands.

[Part 2 0:00:34] Lee: How much was that?

Collings: At that time it was only two or three hundred pounds.

[Part 2 0:00:39] Lee: That was a lot of money though, wasn't it?

Collings: It was a lot of money, but I thought I would rather do that than stop here with this woman, and that's what happened.

[Part 2 0:00:53] Lee: So where did you go to first?

Collings: We went to Signy Island, all the crowd of us, and we built a big refrigerator there, and then we were all due to go to Halley Bay. We went on two different ships actually, I think it was. John Gallsworthy wintered and I stopped there for a couple of weeks to get the parts of the hut up.

[Part 2 0:01:28] Lee: This was the 1966 rebuild. Is that right?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 2 0:01:34] Lee: What did you make of Halley, because it is very different from the west coast, isn't it?

Collings: Oh yes. When we got there, we went down the old base huts, down steep ladders. But I don't think I would have liked to have wintered there because ... Anyhow we did stop for two weeks; it might have been three. I don't know how many we did, but anyhow we were due to go back up to Stonington then. We did eventually sail and we were the first ship to go up through the Weddell without any ice.

[Part 2 0:02:11] Lee: What, ice free?

Collings: Ice free, yes.

[Part 2 0:02:15] Lee: Do you know why that was?

Collings: I don't know, but they told us: 'This was the first time a ship has gone up ice free.' And then we went on. That's when I would have built the hut in Port Stanley for the diesel shed. And I wintered at Stonington and had a very good year there.

[Part 2 0:02:44] Lee: That was quite a big base, wasn't it?

Collings: Yes yes.

[Part 2 0:02:46] Lee: What do you remember of Stonington?

Collings: We had the hut there. Further down there was the hut still remaining from the first American and his wife went down there to the Antarctic.

[Part 2 0:03:06] Lee: Byrd?

Collings: No no. I can't think of her name⁹, but they wintered down there, and their huts were still there.

[Part 2 0:03:12] Lee: Oh you mean Finn Ronne?

Collings: That's right, yes, because his wife was with him, wasn't she? A lot of us had eventually dug the huts out, to keep the seals in it, the carcasses. It was all iced up.

[Part 2 0:03:30] Lee: So you were using the American base as meat store?

Collings: Yes, that's right.

[Part 2 0:03:37] Lee: Describe Stonington base to me. What was it like when you walked through the door?

Collings: While I was there, I put a kitchen on, so we had a proper kitchen.

[Part 2 0:03:51] Lee: You mean an extension?

Collings: Yes, an extension, and then there was the bunkroom where ... The lounge, all downstairs, with the rooms for the scientist chaps. And then you went upstairs and there was your bunkrooms upstairs. And then you could go out and there was the diesel shed I built, just outside.

[Part 2 0:04:18] Lee: They tell me it is a lovely spot.

Collings: Oh yes, I enjoyed it there. Because there was the remains of another base that's down there. In fact I think Fuchs had been there. He got caught down there didn't he? I'm sure there was the remains of where he had it. And that was one of the first things I done when I went to Stonington. Prior to me getting there, they had lost three or four men¹⁰, dogs and all, killed, and I put a plaque up. I expect it is still there today. And one of them was a Freemason from Scotland.

[Part 2 0:05:01] Lee: Right. Is this Noel and Allan?

Collings: No, they survived, I think. I don't know who. There was two or three of them killed, with the dog teams, prior to me going there. They were out ... whether the sea ice broke up or what, I don't know.

[Part 2 0:05:21] Lee: Right. Would this be the story of the men who went off over the sea ice and never came back¹¹?

Collings: Yes. I think what they'd done: You are always told to go from A to B, B to C, and apparently they went from ... A storm come up and ...

[Part 2 0:05:42] Lee: Blew the ice out?

⁹ Edith "Jackie" Ronne, wife of Finn Ronne (Wikipedia).

¹⁰ John Noel and Tom Allan, died June 1966 (British Antarctic Monument Trust website).

¹¹ Stanley Black, David Statham and Geoffrey Stride, May 1958. Their memorials are at Horseshoe Island and Rother Point, not Stonington (BAMT website).

Collings: Yes.

[Part 2 0:05:44] Lee: And some of the dogs, came back, didn't they?

Collings: I don't know. That would be the one then.

[Part 2 0:05:51] Lee: But you'd find it a bit grisly putting up a plaque to men who lost their lives, wouldn't it?

Collings: Yes. But it was a brass plaque. It had come down from ... As I say, he was a Freemason, one of them.

[Part 2 0:06:03] Lee: Are you a Freemason?

Collings: No.

[Part 2 0:06:05] Lee: Because you mention it quite a lot.

Collings: Oh no no.

[Part 2 0:06:09] Lee: You had dog trips out to Horseshoe and Fossil Bluff as well?

Collings: That's where we went: Horseshoe yes, Fossil Bluff. Well I didn't go with the dog teams to Fossil Bluff. I flew down.

[Part 2 0:06:19] Lee: Even then?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 2 0:06:22] Lee: In what, a Cessna?

Collings: No. It was what the Swiss used to have¹². I can't think of it. No I flew down there.

[Part 2 0:06:39] Lee: Twin Otter?

Collings: No it wasn't a Twin Otter when I went down there, no. And then we spent the summer going all the way around with the survey teams. They go up one point, we go up another one, and then they would do with the magnetometer.

[Part 2 0:07:00] Lee: So if you went to Fossil Bluff, there's no runway as such, was there?

Collings: No, they land on the sea ice. At Stonington they landed but there was no runway.

[Part 2 0:07:17] Lee: What more can you tell me? Describe Fossil Bluff when you ...

¹² Pilatus Porter.

Collings: Well when we got there, all it is is a hut up on the thing, but as soon as we got there, we loaded up. We had – I don't know how they got that down there – a mechanical ... a tracked vehicle we had down there. We had an Army driver driving it, and then there was the dog teams as well down there. I don't know how they got that down there. I can't ever remember ... Anyhow it was there and we used that for the ... because the ice was quite ... The Americans had been there and done it with the air and we were down there doing the ground things. We used to climb up the mountains, and we were at the top and – you know.

[Part 2 0:08:13] Lee: So the surveyors were putting in the fixed points, the fixes, were they?

Collings: That's right.

[Part 2 0:08:19] Lee: Did you ever have any bad nights out in the field, so to speak?

Collings: No. We always had ... Well I never had any bad ...

[Part 2 0:08:17] Lee: You never got laid over, laid up?

Collings: No. Never had no troubles at all down there for medical ...

[Part 2 0:08:36] Lee: I'm thinking also of whether the weather turned against you and you were stuck in your tent for several days?

Collings: We had that when we went out on that long trip down with the three of us. We were laid up perhaps a couple of days, but nothing ...

[Part 2 0:08:53] Lee: It sounds like the Antarctic has treated you quite kindly, hasn't it?

Collings: Oh I have enjoyed it. I've enjoyed it.

[Part 2 0:08:58] Lee: You were due to go back to Deception Island, weren't you, at one point?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 2 0:09:01] Lee: In '68?

Collings: Of course the eruption ... so they put me over to Adelaide. They said 'Do you want to go home?' I said 'No'. So they put me over at Adelaide for a winter. And there was another carpenter there from Scotland, and the two of us done a bar and done something else.

[Part 2 0:09:24] Lee: Oh you built the bar at Adelaide, did you?

Collings: Yes, and then of course they came ...

[Part 2 0:09:32] Lee: Who was the Scotsman you worked with? Do you remember his name?

Collings: I can't think of what he was called, a chap with glasses¹³. He came from Arbroath.

[Part 2 0:09:39] Lee: All right, Never mind.

Collings: And then of course in the summer they came down and extended it with the plastic things, the sheds. What's his name came down then. His brother is the big horse jumping man, Alan Smith.

[Part 2 0:10:04] Lee: Right. Oh Harvey Smith?

Collings: Harvey Smith, yes. Alan was a carpenter and he came down on this job. And that's how we were talking about we had an Irish chap there that was getting more money than me and him, and we had to go in in the mornings to get him out of bed. Because he had a City & Guilds, and we had been down there three years and he was getting more money than ...

[Part 2 0:10:30] Lee: So how was it, working with timber in low temperatures or even minus temperature? Did it present any problems?

Collings: No, no problems at all. What they'd done with the big huts, they'd assembled them in England and photographed every process.

[Part 2 0:10:47] Lee: Every step?

Collings: Every step, and when you come down there, it was all there for you to do. But the trouble was at Adelaide, they forgot to put the bolts in.

[Part 2 0:10:58] Lee: So what did you do?

Collings: Well they carry a lot of stuff on base and we managed to get stuff to put it together.

[Part 2 0:11:08] Lee: So it was a bit of a bodge job, was it?

Collings: Well the bolts were that kind of thing; otherwise everything else was there. But for some unknown reason, they forgot to put the bolts in. But the one I done at Deception, everything was there. The first time, just going back to when I went down the first time on the *Shackleton*, there was only nine Fids there, and we went everywhere. We even landed at Elephant Island.

[Part 2 0:11:46] Lee: Really?

Collings: And we went to Anvers Island where the Americans are¹⁴. I don't know if you've ever been to that one.

¹³ David Bowen (according to the Database of Winterers).

[Part 2 0:11:54] Lee: No.

Collings: There was a woman there. She comes down in the summer and she got all the jumpers and everything there, a shop. Yes, we went there and we went to Port Lockroy. That was before they made it a museum. Oh yes, we called everywhere.

[Part 2 0:12:14] Lee: How well did you know the Shackleton story, if you were landing at Elephant Island. Do you know the history?

Collings: We knew about him, I knew about him, yes.

[Part 2 0:12:23] Lee: You have read about him, have you?

Collings: Yes, oh yes.

[Part 2 0:12:30] Lee: So was it a special feeling to land there.

Collings: Oh yes, it was good really, because when I saw it the other day ...

[Part 2 0:12:42] Lee: On television?

Collings: That's the beach that we landed on.

[Part 2 0:12:44] Lee: Was there anything remaining? Were the boats ...?

Collings: No, there was nothing there when we went there.

[Part 2 0:12:48] Lee: The upturned boats weren't still there?

Collings: No, nothing there. So that was on our way down to Deception the first time.

[Part 2 0:13:04] Lee: So you got transferred to Adelaide when Deception blew up, to do general base work, and I think there weren't quite as many Fids as they were expecting, were there?

Collings: No. We had a few there but I've got a feeling that's where that chap I was talking about, that didn't fit in. He wintered and the base commander had him, not deported but sent home, and he went up to the Andes climbing and he fall off, got killed.

[Part 2 0:13:40] Lee: I've got a note here which says that the numbers at Adelaide were down due to the loss of a Porter, and the crew having to winter at Fossil Bluff. Does that ring any bells? The Porter was a plane I guess.

¹⁴ Palmer Station.

Collings: Yes, she was a plane. I think that could have been the one we went down on but she only carried two crew. But I've got a feeling that was the year that I was at Stonington¹⁵.

[Part 2 0:14:08] Lee: Right, the year before.

Collings: Yes.

[Part 2 0:14:11] Lee: That was in '67 at Stonington?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 2 0:14:15] Lee: OK. And what's this about somebody called Don Parnell finding Victor on the radio?

Collings: Yes, Don Parnell was the base commander.

[Part 2 0:14:23] Lee: At Adelaide?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 2 0:14:25] Lee: Is this Victor Sylvester?

Collings: Yes, for me, yes, every Saturday afternoon.

[Part 2 0:14:33] Lee: On the World Service?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 2 0:14:35] Lee: Was this a special request, from you?

Collings: Yes, I said to Don ..., every Saturday afternoon; I think it was Saturday afternoons. He got me and I shut myself in the radio cabin and listened to it.

[Part 2 0:14:49] Lee: Were you dancing?

Collings: No no, I just sat there. Yes, that's right.

[Part 2 0:14:53] Lee: That must have felt a bit strange, to suddenly hear the Palm Court Trio or whatever it was.

Collings: Well Victor Sylvester was the big orchestra, wasn't it? But it was just something there.

[Part 2 0:15:08] Lee: Did you have much connection with life away from the rest of the world?

¹⁵ No, 1968 was the year five men involuntarily wintered at Fossil Bluff after the loss of their plane, the same year that Collings wintered at Adelaide.

Collings: No, because you had your hundred words or whatever it was, or twenty words a month. That was all. We never had the News on much. So we were just ...

[Part 2 0:15:31] Lee: You didn't know about the Cuban missile crisis?

Collings: No, nothing like that.

[Part 2 0:15:35] Lee: Berlin wall or ...?

Collings: No. It was just our own little world.

[Part 2 0:15:43] Lee: At the end of that year, that was '68, what was then ..., what were the options open to you then, John?

Collings: Well I would have done my two winters and three summers, so I was coming home for good then.

[Part 2 0:15:58] Lee: That was BAS rules, was it?

Collings: Well no, I think some of them stopped, but the majority done the two, well it was about three years now nearly, isn't it?

[Part 2 0:16:09] Lee: Two and a half years, call it. And they didn't offer you any more time? You didn't want to stay any longer?

Collings: No no because my mother was a widow then, had been a widow for years, so I thought 'Well I will come home, then.'

[Part 2 0:16:25] Lee: How was that for you, to come back to Britain after all that time?

Collings: Oh it was different.

[Part 2 0:16:30] Lee: In what way?

Collings: I don't know really. I suppose there's more people home here than just the few you associated with down there.

[Part 2 0:16:41] Lee: So were things changing that much, in the 60s? You were away ...

Collings: Most of the sixties really.

[Part 2 0:16:49] Lee: Yes. You missed the Beatles.

Collings: Yes, but we had all the records and stuff like that come down. You could order what's the food, minister? Where for? Hope Bay. So you ordered all your food and you got your records. We had some wonderful collections of stuff there. Oh yes.

[Part 2 0:17:13] Lee: Were you ordering Victor Sylvester records?

Collings: No no.

[Part 2 0:17:18] Lee: So what way was ... I mean you left Paignton to go South and you came back to Paignton. I can't imagine Paignton changed that much in ten years.

Collings: Oh no, it hadn't, no. And I was lucky: I got some work when I come back. And I've been like it ever since, really. But of course now I'm retired.

[Part 2 0:17:40] Lee: Were you free-lancing around, were you?

Collings: Well I went self-employed.

[Part 2 0:17:48] Lee: Was there anything you learned in your Antarctic and Falkland years, which you felt was useful in later life?

Collings: Well I think when I was down in the Antarctic, I learned to be patient, because I used to be very fiery tempered, and I even read the boss at Port Stanley that time when we brought all the huts back to put them up, and he took John away. I lost my rag then and he was the boss. I even went in and asked how much it was to resign, to go home. But I didn't because I couldn't afford it.

[Part 2 0:18:32] Lee: Was that a low point?

Collings: It was at the time but then you go out at night with the lads, the crowd, and it was all right.

[Part 2 0:18:41] Lee: A few beers later it's all right again, is it?

Collings: Yes. I didn't drink much but I did drink.

[Part 2 0:18:47] Lee: You did that night?

Collings: It was funny because there was houses quite close to us, and the lady, I knew her, was going to come out. Anyhow her heard the row start; then her opened the door and just stood listening to all ... Of course it's all over Stanley when you have a row.

[Part 2 0:19:08] Lee: So you learned some patience whilst you were down South?

Collings: Oh yes, because I used to be a bit of a B... for quick temper, like you know.

[Part 2 0:19:19] Lee: Did you pick up any skills down there which you were able to employ back here?

Collings: Not really. It's just what I learned back up here, I could use down there and it was all the same. No I enjoyed it because it worked in very well.

[Part 2 0:19:44] Lee: Did you miss it?

Collings: Oh I did for a while because it was so good, or I thought it was good. John thought it was as well I think.

[Part 2 0:19:54] Lee: List me some of the good points. What was so good about living and working in the Falklands and in the Antarctic? What were the pluses?

Collings: Well you are more or less your own boss, and then you were seeing all different stuff all the time. Like Port Stanley, you got to know everybody, all friendly.

[Part 2 0:20:26] Lee: And back here, wasn't it the same back here?

Collings: Well you get your little cliques. It was like in the badminton club; when I got back here, there was cliques and over there, there wasn't. It was all friendly.

[Part 2 0:20:38] Lee: That's because there weren't enough people to form cliques?

Collings: Well I suppose so, yes. But no, I really loved it over there, because I suppose if the marriage had gone ahead, I might have still been there.

[Part 2 0:20:58] Lee: You did get married in the end, didn't you?

Collings: I've got married to Diane, yes. It's forty years, just gone forty years we have been married.

[Part 2 0:21:08] Lee: You got married quite late at 44?

Collings: Oh yes. I used to go to dancing school and I met her over there. But we have got on well.

[Part 2 0:21:28] Lee: So looking back over your life (I usually ask this question last of all), how do the Antarctic years rate in your life?

Collings: Oh I would think, myself, one of the best, because I said to my wife one day, I said 'I have been to the end of the rainbow.' We did really go on the sea ice, we went to the end. Of course there ain't no pot of gold but we did ... I mean all they times ... I mean one day, had we been laying depots at Hope Bay? But we'd have done the most miles that particular trip, that anybody had done in a day, and stuff like that, you know.

[Part 2 0:22:15] Lee: Oh right? So you broke records?

Collings: Well somebody broke it after us. But we done 50 or 60 that day, because with sea ice ...

[Part 2 0:22:26] Lee: You had been to the end of the rainbow; you had been to the end of the planet hadn't you, or nearly?

Collings: Yes. But no, I really really enjoyed it.

[Part 2 0:22:36] Lee: Have you kept in touch with many people? Do you go to reunions?

Collings: I only went to one reunion, that was Hope Bay.

[Part 2 0:22:45] Lee: In '96?

Collings: '96 or whenever it was. The trouble is that I have only got a small car and you have got to travel up there all the time and now I keep whipping into hospital for angina and heart attacks. So it's ...

[Part 2 0:23:08] Lee: A bit far?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 2 0:23:15] Lee: There was a lot of television coverage over the winter, wasn't there, just gone, about Amundsen and Scott, and a bit about Shackleton as well, and Frank Wild. What did you feel about looking at all that?

Collings: Oh liked it. That one of Wild I thought was very good, very good.

[Part 2 0:23:34] Lee: Paul Rose's documentary on television?

Collings: Yes.

[Part 2 0:23:36] Lee: He was a Fid, you know.

Collings: Was he?

[Part 2 0:23:38] Lee: Yes. He was a base commander.

Collings: Oh well I learn.

[Part 2 0:23:42] Lee: A few years back.

Collings: Oh yes, I rather liked that and especially when they went to South Georgia and all that there because I had been there and seen it all, and all that. I really liked it. I thought it was very good, Because the Wild one was real, as it was. But some: they put it all glossy or something. It isn't the same.

[Part 2 0:24:18] Lee: It was proper reality TV

Collings: It was, yes, that's true.

[Part 2 0:24:29] Lee: It's been lovely talking to you. Thank you very much John, thank you.

Collings: And you.

[Part 2 0:24:33] [End of Part Two]

ENDS

Possible extracts:

- [Part 1 0:22:20] Building houses at South Georgia.
- [Part 1 0:32:50] New diesel shed at Deception.
- [Part 1 0:44:47] Feeding the dogs in a blizzard.
- [Part 1 0:59:52] An Argentinian plane lands at Stanley.
- [Part 2 0:10:47] No bolts supplied for a hut at Adelaide.