

ALAN PIGGOTT

Edited transcript of a recording of Alan Piggott interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee in Doncaster on 11th June 2012. BAS Archives reference AD6/24/1/176. Transcribed by Dawn Sutcliffe on 12th September 2019

[Part 1 0:00:00] Lee: This is Alan Piggott interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 11th June 2012. Alan Piggott part one.

Piggott: My name is Alan Piggott, the place is Doncaster. Do you want the place of birth?

[Part 1 0:00:14] Lee: Yes

Piggott: The place of birth was Bradford in West Yorkshire.

[Part 1 0:00:19] Lee: When's your birthday?

Piggott: 13th March 1937

[Part 1 0:00:23] Lee: So how old are you now?

Piggott: 75

[Part 1 0:00:26] Lee: Still working?

Piggott: Oh yes

[Part 1 0:00:28] Lee: Doing what?

Piggott: Until November this year I finally decided to retire. I do two jobs part time. I work 27 hours a week half of which is for Brodsworth Parish Council for which I'm the clerk and the other half is the clerk to the management committee of the community centre that I work for.

[Part 1 0:00:52] Lee: What was your father's profession?

Piggott: Before he was injured, he was a Baker, a journeyman Baker but he had an accident during the war that crippled one shoulder and from then on he didn't work. He used to sit at the end of the passageway waiting for the postal order to come for his benefit. Rather sad, he was a nice man but unable to work. This was a family of seven all together. I had mum, dad, two brothers and two sisters. I was the second eldest.

[Part 1 0:01:30] Lee: So, had he had much of an education your father?

Piggott: Hardly any at all

[Part 1 0:01:35] Lee: And how about you?

Piggott: I went to Grammar school in Bradford but wasted a lot of it. I came out with just four GCE's. I can't say that I enjoyed school life at all being more orientated towards the outdoors; the cricket and football rather than geography and history. Some of it was quite boring and badly presented, in fact the highlight of five years at grammar school was the day that school burnt down. I was on my way to school one morning and some of the lads were coming away from school and I said, 'what's going on?' 'Oh the schools burnt down'. Now the only benefit that that gave us was we only got one day off because they rehoused us the following day. Bradford Education Authority were so efficient that they managed to fit us into a school that had been derelict for a few years. One day for a school burning down is not enough.

[Part 1 0:02:56] Lee: That's patently unfair isn't it? So, did you do other things outdoors such as climbing, sailing?

Piggott: Not whilst I was at school that came later. No, I played football, I played cricket for school, I played cricket for house that sort of thing. Outside school we were right villains because we used to find any plot of land we could to play cricket and football including nearby school playgrounds and we were chased off more than once by the police. There could be something like 50 of us playing a game of football all at the same time. It was Sunday afternoon, it was gorgeous. There was a piece of land directly in front of the house that we lived in that was owned by the education authority to produce school meals. Of course, at weekends they didn't work so at weekends all the lads from the street were on this piece of land. It was time out but to get there we had to slide through the railings at the bottom of the garden or climb over the spikes at the top. My mother's heart used to be in her mouth most of the time seeing us leap over these railings which over the other side there was a 6 or 7 foot drop. But as kids it didn't bother us, we just went and that was it. But we enjoyed our time I must admit

[Part 1 0:04:42] Lee: So, what happened to you when you left school Alan?

Piggott: When I left school (...)

[Part 1 0:04:48] Lee: Age?

Piggott: I was 16. I wasn't armed because I hadn't got the results. I left school in July and it was August when the results came out. But in the meantime, I'd been interviewed by the Deputy Director for Education in Bradford and he said 'right you've got a job subject to you getting Maths and English in your GCE's'. It turned out I got Maths, English, French and German so by the time the results came out I was confirmed. I was placed in the general office and I'll always have an abiding memory of an office in the early 1950's because my duties were concerned with making the tea, washing up afterwards, stoking the fire, getting it lit, running round from one department to another and the typing pool to get letters typed, putting stamps on envelopes towards the end of the day, sitting on a high stool no back to it and the desk in front of me was the old fashioned sloping desk, and doing any bits of paperwork that I was allowed to do at that time. At 18 it was time for me to do national service. I was 18 in the March and I waited a couple of months and nothing had happened. I was getting a bit fed up with the way things were in the office, so I rang whoever it was about being called up and I actually went into the RAF in September.

[Part 1 0:07:10] Lee: Had they forgotten you?

Piggott: No, I don't think so it was just that there was probably a glut; these were post war years and they were very busy. The first thing that I was called to do was to have a medical which was a sham really. They looked at me and said 'Cough, you're A1 you're in'. Then I had to report to Cardington, which was the recruitment point, given the uniforms and then moved onto West Kirby for square-bashing, then onto trade training. It was in trade training where one day the corporal came to me and said 'you, you're going for a Morse Test' I was the only one out of our whole flight that was told to do this, so I just went. I listened to the dots and dashes and came away. Nobody said a darn thing. Until after square-bashing I was sent to Compton Bassett where wireless operators are trained

[Part 1 0:08:33] Lee: So, do you think they'd spotted something in you?

Piggott: Well they must have done; I must have recognised some of the sounds that were given to me during this particular test which lasted only about 15 or 20 minutes anyway. You know what the forces are like. 16 weeks at Compton Bassett and then, I can't remember where I moved onto from there. I think it was Bircham Newton in Norfolk. That was just a listening station and it was whilst I was there, I hadn't been there all

that long, when the flight sergeant came into the ¹billet. During the night, it must have been one or two o'clock during the night and said 'you, you, you and you get out of bed, get packed, you're off'. No idea where, so 4 of us packed. Eventually 3 of us went to Malta and 1 to Cyprus and this was at the point where the Suez Crisis was on. We were shuffled around all over the midlands for a day or two because there were several staging points and eventually the 3 of us ended up in Southampton. We got on a Sunderland Flying Boat from Southampton Water we flew to Malta. The purpose of the job in Malta was simply to listen really to the aircraft. This was at a time when the Vulcans were really flying over Egypt and I think at one point there was a mission by the Vulcans to bomb Cairo or somewhere in Egypt. We were instructed to call them back, I think this had been at a time when Anthony Eden decided that it's over, they've capitulated. The canal is now open, or it would be open as soon as they'd cleared all the debris from it. So, the thing stopped. As far as I was concerned the work aspect of the posting to Malta was quite unimportant. I was only a lad of 18 years old; football was at the top of my mind and because we were in the Mediterranean, swimming was very important to us as well. Almost every afternoon we would get in the Gary [phonetic] and go down to the beach and we'd swim in the sea for an hour or two and then come back and maybe have a game of football or something like that. I saw those 4 months more as a holiday than anything else. But I was quite proud in later years to think that I'd been part of something that was important for my country.

[Part 1 0:12:23] Lee: Sounds like you actually stopped the Suez war

Piggott: Well not me personally. Nothing like that

[Part 1 0:12:28] Lee: Or sent the message that stopped it

Piggott: I was just there with thousands of others doing what I had to do. The system was you only did a 4 hour watch each day, so there's another 20 hours to fill in apart from sleeping. We had a football pitch and we could down to the beach easy.

[Part 1 0:12:52] Lee: So, were you in anyway consciously trying to improve your Morse skills, hone your radio?

Piggott: All the time. I reckoned by the time I'd finished training at Compton Bassett that I had a fairly good aptitude for Morse and reading

¹ Billet is a place where soldiers are lodged temporarily

messages and sending messages. I was quite proud of that. Even today I can remember the Morse code; it's not something that I've forgotten. We finally came home from Malta and I was posted to Preston and again that was a sort of listening job

[Part 1 0:13:40] Lee: When you say listening what were you listening to, them or us?

Piggott: We were given a frequency and we sat there for a few hours waiting perhaps for any signal that came up on that frequency. The signals would come if they did happen, from aircraft like the old ²Shackletons and things like that; asking for any sort of information, what their position was, what the local weather was, something like that. I suppose in many ways the level that we were operating; we didn't really know what the bigger picture was. We just sat there, took a message and there was a Sergeant in the office next door, and we gave him the message, and that was the end of the job. You'd no idea what it was all about. There was never, to my memory, any message that went back to the same aircraft it was just receiving perhaps these days it was called intelligence.

[Part 1 0:14:58] Lee: It does sound a bit like GCHQ or the early years of

Piggott: It's something like that. These places were dotted all around the UK because in those days there was still, I suppose the Cold war, the Russian threat

[Part 1 0:15:14] Lee: Absolutely, Cuba hadn't happened yet had it?

Piggott: That's right. We had to be there. Eventually saw my time out at the end of the two years National Service

[Part 1 0:15:27] Lee: So then presumably you had to make a decision about what to do next?

Piggott: When I came out the RAF, I didn't really want to go back to the education office where I was before I did National Service, so I got a job at a local steel works because the money was better. We're only talking about £8 a week something like that. That lasted for just about one year until the day the progress office manager said 'Alan I want to see you' along with two other people working there. He said, 'I'm very, very sorry there is currently a recession in the steel industry, and you've got to go, you are now redundant'. So, I went home that day and started to wonder what I'd do next. It just so happened that we had

² The Avro Shackleton was a British long-range maritime patrol aircraft developed during the late 1940's

a neighbour living almost next door who was keen on reading Sunday papers. And they never minded that we just popped in and said ‘hello, how’s things going?’ And there he’d be on the floor with his newspapers open and we’d do this, pop in, several times over a few weeks. Eventually he said to me ‘hey Alan this looks interesting. The Falkland Islands Dependencies are looking for wireless operator mechanics.’ I said, ‘oh that sounds good’. The first thing I’ve got to admit is that my geography was absolutely terrible at that time. Since I didn’t have a job I thought ‘well I’ll have a go at this’. Got a letter off, got a response back ‘please turn up in an address in (...)

[Part 1 0:17:47] Lee: Millbank?

Piggott: Millbank was one. That was for the interview and Wimpole Street for a medical if I’m not mistaken. You’re bringing it all back now Chris, I’m grateful.

[Part 1 0:18:05] Lee: So, you were interviewed first?

Piggott: Yes, and then the medical and then nothing happened until I got a letter that said ‘please report to Southampton at a date in September 1958. You’re off’

[Part 1 0:18:28] Lee: I appreciate it’s a long time ago, what if anything do you remember of the interview?

Piggott: It was rubbish! 1958, it was at least 12 months since I’d left the RAF. This interview couldn’t have lasted more than 10 minutes during which I had a Morse key in front of me and I was asked to send a message. By that time my Morse was so rusty that it was unbelievable, it was hardly readable. But I persevered, I sent whatever message it was, and they seemed to like it. That was it. Nothing more to it.

[Part 1 0:19:16] Lee: Do you remember who was the guy (...)

Piggott: They must have been desperate [laughs]

[Part 1 0:19:19] Lee: I can confirm that they were at that time. Do you remember who was behind the other side of the table? Frank Elliott?

Piggott: No, that doesn’t ring a bell

[Part 1 0:19:30] Lee: Ray Adie?

Piggott: No. Ray Adie was a geologist surveyor. I didn't know him then, but I knew his name and he was quite popular for some reason, but I don't know what.

[Part 1 0:19:48] Lee: Bill Sloman was the other name

Piggott: Bill Sloman was even more popular. I think that was the gentleman that I might have been involved with during the interview

[Part 1 0:19:58] Lee: Do you remember them sussing you out psychologically at all?

Piggott: No not a bit. In fact, I don't think that happened until I was on the *Biscoe*. My mother and one of my sisters decided that they wanted to see me off. We had a train down to Southampton and I put them into Bed and Breakfast accommodation and went straight onto the *Biscoe*. The following day was the day we sailed. Now there was a tall (...) Foster is that a name you know? I can't remember what his Christian name was, but he was there, and I think that he had something to do with the FIDS head office in London. One of the purposes of the sailing south I think was to find out just what these lads were, including me, and how they fit together. I was 21 years old. I think I might well have been the youngest. I can remember that I was mostly quiet and reserved. I've always been a good listener so I could always enjoy the jokes and the conversations and the debates that were going on, on the ship. I shared a cabin with another Fid, wore glasses, curly hair. He was going further south than me, but I can't remember his name; who sort of took me under his wing because I'm fairly sure that he may have been south before.

[Part 1 0:22:29] Piggott: I think this chap Mr Foster was assessing me because at one point during the trip he came and sat with me and said 'Alan, are you ok?' I said, 'oh yea I'm fine'. That was more or less the conversation I had with him, but I got the impression afterwards why did he come and ask me? And I realised it was because I wasn't in the crowd. I wasn't really out of it or on the fringe of it; I was quite enjoying everything, because this was an absolutely brand-new experience for me. The trouble was that the weather kept getting nice and warm and then hot. Even when we got down to Montevideo, which we were there one or two days, it was still nice and warm. But from there down towards Stanley it began to cool down. Eventually we ended up at Stanley, that's where we were issued with our Polar kit. We also were invited to the Governors house for an 'at home' which we all enjoyed I suppose. But my abiding memory of Port Stanley was it was a smallish town of mainly timber houses, one jetty, the SS *Great Britain* parked off a bit. Then when

1983 came round and the Falklands shindig came up I thought ‘what the heck is all the fuss about?’ People are thinking poor Stanley is some great city which it wasn’t. By then it could have expanded considerably but I doubt it very much because the population is spread, although there is a concentration in Stanley, most of it is spread over the islands anyway.

[Part 1 0:25:14] Lee: That was the year of course when most other people worked out where the Falklands were. At what point did you work out where the Falklands were?

Piggott: I didn’t actually. I’d still no idea. I’m going to cut a corner here. It wasn’t until I saw the first iceberg that I said to myself ‘Oh mother what have I done!’ That’s honest. I’d no idea. I was committed and that was it

[Part 1 0:25:48] Lee: So, you didn’t know you were going to a snowy environment?

Piggott: No, no idea. From Stanley we went across to South Georgia for a few days and then came back to Stanley and then the *Biscoe* took us south. First port of call as I remember was Deception. And from there we called at (...) I can remember Hope Bay; I can remember Port Lockroy before we got to the Argentine islands. It was when the *Biscoe* sailed at the end of the summer having dropped off all the rest of the cargo that I stood at the back door of the hut and I cried. I still thought ‘Mum I’ve done it now’ But that was the beginning of 3 years of total enjoyment. I really enjoyed those 3 years, just like I enjoyed most of my national service anyway. You just get into it, and do it, that was great.

[Part 1 0:27:03] Lee: One more question on what we’ve covered already. Did you at any time brush up your Morse?

Piggott: No, not till I got there. There was no opportunity to do that. It would have been nice to have had a bit of practice on the ship, but I think the crew discipline on the *Biscoe* was a bit more strict than it was say on the *Shackleton*. So, we hardly ever saw the radio officer. So, I waited until we were in the Argentine islands and I was taking over from Ted Clapp. Ted was ex merchant navy as I recall, and he was extremely patient. One of the problems I had was although I could brush up on my Morse, and Ted put me onto schedules with Port Stanley for weather reports and that sort of thing, almost straight away. So, everything was brushing up nicely from that side. My big problem, a really big problem that frightened me somewhat was that I had two RCA receivers and a great big ET4336 transmitter. It stood about 5 feet

high and I said to Ted 'if anything goes wrong with these I've no idea what to do' and he said 'well, just keep your fingers crossed and if something goes wrong, at the end of the year you can always ask for a complete replacement unit'. During the first year some things did go wrong, but I was blessed with two physicists on the base, Chris Horton and Harry Agger. I would always try to fix things myself if I could but if that didn't happen, I would ask Chris or Harry if they would come and have a look at something and share their thoughts with me until we got it right. It was a system that worked for me and I gained a fair amount of confidence or putting it the other way round, I stopped worrying too much about the way things were going.

[Part 1 0:29:56] Lee: But if your Morse was by your own admission rusty does that make those first few messages to Stanley a bit suspect?

Piggott: Yes. The initial messages were more groups of 5 numbers, digits

[Part 1 0:30:13] Lee: Codes

Piggott: Yea because they were the weather codes. Argentine Islands was a scientific station, it wasn't a sledging station. We had 4 or 5 meteorological chaps on the base taking observations at very regular intervals then they coded them up, passed them into ³WT office and I was the one that was responsible for sending them back to Stanley. The first thing I did in brushing up was with numbers. The actual procedure for sending messages was not a problem anyway because I could remember that fairly easily from my RAF days. During the first month or so, Ted did the plain language Morse sending until he probably felt that I was ready to do it and I eased into it fairly easy. Again, there was no problem. One of the things about wireless operators is that they all have their own style. They all have what's called a 'fist'. You can actually tell who's sending you a message by the way he operates on the key. For example, John Cheek who was the Hope Bay operator, he had a special Morse key which I think was a side swiper while the rest of us went up and down. John could send Morse between 30 and 40 words a minute. My best was about 20 or 25 but that was good compared to the rest of the wireless operators down there. When you send your weather ⁴obs to Stanley or any other plain language signals, when you're actually listening to either the Base operators or Stanley, you can usually tell who was on the key. I mean some of these bases only had one operator anyway. If you'd only just broken into a message

³ Wireless telegraphy

⁴ observations

that was being sent and so you didn't know the call sign you could still guess who it was and say 'well that's Barry at Base G or John at Hawk Bay'

[Part 1 0:33:13] Lee: Would you have been aware of your own style, your own signature?

Piggott: Yea, I thought mine was good, I thought it was as good as anybody's if not better because as time went on, I developed my own style. And I always tried to make it as clear as I possibly could. There was a reason for that because once Ted had gone, I was the only WT operator on the base which meant I was there 7 days a week for the rest of the year with virtually no relief. Because we were scientific there were weather obs going in 3 or 4 times a day and then there was the ordinary signal stuff that had to be dealt with as well, incoming and outgoing. There were the newsletters that we were receiving; there were greetings telegrams that people were sending to families and friends. I was very fortunate because without asking two of the weathermen volunteered to send the occasional obs for me. Now that meant that I could have a couple of hours off which was gratefully received. Their Morse was crude and basic, but they were very brave. They could tune the transmitter, they could get the right frequency on the receiver, they could waffle their way through the Morse code and get the obs off with not too much difficulty actually. If they needed any tuition on the Morse code itself, I was quite willing to help them with it.

[Part 1 0:35:15] Lee: This sounds like it was a staffing problem then if you were the only person on the base who could really do Morse. You were tied to your desk

Piggott: I was.

[Part 1 0:35:25] Lee: 365 days a year?

Piggott: Yea. That was certainly the case in the first year. Maybe someone learned their lesson at the end of that because I was blessed with a second operator in the second and third years that I was down there. In the second year Frazer, I can't remember his surname. He was a Scot, only a small chap. We gave him a nickname we just called him Otch. He joined me and it became too easy then. I think we worked week on, week off. In the third year it was Tony, an Irishman; very nice lad. Again, we shared the week on, week off.

[Part 1 0:36:22] Lee: Frazer Whyte?

Piggott: Whyte that's him

[Part 1 0:36:25] Lee: with a 'Y'. Third year which is '62

Piggott: Tony

[Part 1 0:36:32] Lee: Well there is a C Wade

Piggott: No. Can you look at the year before that '61. The full years I was there were '59, '60 and '61

[Part 1 0:36:44] Lee: '61 was Frazer Whyte

Piggott: Perhaps Tony was there the year before

[Part 1 0:36:51] Lee: '60 was J.A. Quinn

Piggott: That's it Tony Quinn. I got them the wrong way round, sorry.

[Part 1 0:36:58] Lee: Don't worry that's ok. So, life got easier?

Piggott: Indeed it did. Apart from being a wireless operator which was my primary job you had other things to do as well. Things like emptying the loo and getting rid of the ⁵gash and giving the cook a day off on Sunday so you did the cooking when it was your turn; cleaning the living room and stuff like that. One of the relationships I developed was with Bob Harkness who was the diesel engineer and Bell, first year '59

[Part 1 0:37:58] Lee: K.R. Bell

Piggott: Keith Bell that's right

[Part 1 0:38:01] Lee: He was Base leader '59

Piggott: He was a diesel engineer as well. It was during that year Keith came to me and said 'Alan, we've just appointed you as the base electrician'. Whatever radio had to do with standard electrics I don't know, but I rewired that up during that year. Keith supervised me but he was quite pleased with the work that I did.

⁵ The gash is a naval term meaning rubbish or garbage

[Part 1 0:38:30] Lee: Certainly, in that first year were you doing 3 hourly obs? How many Met signals did you send per day?

Piggott: There'd be one at 9, one at 2 and another one in the early evening. There might have been one late evening, I'm not sure. 3 or 4

[Part 1 0:38:50] Lee: So you were sending signals 3 or 4 times a day?

Piggott: Yea. And one of the jobs that was done every day by the Met people was they would send up a ⁶radiosonde balloon, receive the signal and that ended up in quite a large coded signal that had to go back to Stanley.

[Part 1 0:39:14] Lee: This all sounds rather tedious Alan and you said earlier it was the most exciting time of your life

Piggott: It was because there was more to it than just operating the radio. There was that time in between schedules. There was the time when Tony or Frazer were doing the radio and I could do something else. We had 2 boats for instance, 2 small boats, one was a little Pram. The Galindes Island itself was set almost in the centre of a group of very small islands. In summer the sea was just like glass, barely a ripple on it and it was absolutely gorgeous to row around some of the islands, never going too far away, just round one island or two and back again. It was wonderful, except for the time when we were happily rowing along perhaps two of us, me and maybe Bob, or one of the others in the boat and suddenly this hump comes up in front of the boat. What kind of whale it was I'll never know but it frightened me for a few minutes. Again, during winter, I can remember this was in my first year, Barry Shaw was given responsibility for measuring the thickness of the sea ice. The only thing was he was so keen to do the job that he went out too early on the ice and I was designated to help him. I would do the writing; he would do the measuring. He had this big drill 'I'll stop here Alan, we'll take a measurement here'. He puts the drill in, and it went straight through. He said, 'we're a bit on thin ice here'. We were both on skis 'we'd better back off a bit'. So, we did right the way back to the island, we weren't going to waste any more time out there. We waited another week or two before the ice thickened up and carried on.

[Part 1 0:41:45] Piggott: I can remember also the day that in summer when I was sitting on the rocks right on the coast of the island just watching seals on floes

⁶ A radiosonde is a battery-powered telemetry instrument carried into the atmosphere usually by a weather balloon that measures various atmospheric parameters and transmits them by radio to a ground receiver

just gliding past and suddenly there was a disturbance in the water. It was a pod of killer whales and they couldn't have been more than 20 feet from where I was sat. Fortunately, I was quite high on the rocks, but to see this massive fin break the water and go down again with 3 or 4 other killer whales alongside. And all they did was just going past. It was a wonderful sight, something never to be forgotten. Then there was the day back to winter, I think it would be in the second or third year, when there were two aircraft based at Deception Island, a Beaver and an Otter. If I'm not mistaken, they were to assist with setting up a base further south. It could have been Marguerite Bay; I don't think it was Fossil Bluff. Anyway, it was decided that the Beaver would visit us on its way hopefully south. We were to determine a flat piece of sea ice for it to land on. Off goes our base leader with a troop and decides that there is a nice flat piece just off the island. There was a channel between our island and the next one over. It was only about up to 100 yards wide. The Beaver finally arrived, landed on the ice. What everybody had forgotten because this was winter was that in that channel there was a rock. We called it locally Channel rock, but you couldn't see it because it was covered. The ice round it because of the tides was weak. One of the skis on landing the Beaver went under followed by quite a piece of the fuselage. The most we could do was to unload it as fast as we could because we were all gathered there on the ice to watch this anyway and get the people out and get them to safety and leave the aeroplane to its own devices. That's what happened; it stayed there with the tail sticking up for months until we eventually pushed it under, because we couldn't stand the sight of it any longer. That was another episode.

[Part 1 0:45:23] Lee: Was there any sense of the loss of one aeroplane is quite serious in the Antarctic, so were you aware of the seriousness of that accident?

Piggott: Oh yea very serious. It stopped the Otter from making any move for some considerable time.

[Part 1 0:45:42] Lee: Because you couldn't have one plane?

Piggott: Oh no there had to be a backup. It was like I was saying at the beginning you don't have one you have two for everything. The pilots were very sanguine about it I suppose they had to accept that

[Part 1 0:46:02] Lee: Do you remember who the pilots were?

Piggott: I can't remember the name of the pilot of the Beaver, but the Otter was a Flight Lieutenant Lord

[Part 1 0:46:16] Lee: Ron Lord

Piggott: Ron Lord. I don't know who the other one was. There's quite a difference between the two characters actually.

[Part 1 0:46:24] Lee: How do you mean?

Piggott: Well Ron Lord was one of the lads from my memory. The other one I felt he had rank; he was a bit superior to everybody else. That may not have been the way anybody else saw him, but it's the way I saw him. Of course, he had to stay with us until such time as we could get him out which happened to be some months further on

[Part 1 0:47:01] Lee: Somebody called English?

Piggott: Could have been but I don't really remember Chris I'm sorry.

[Part 1 0:47:10] Lee: There was Bob Bond the following year

Piggott; No

[Part 1 0:47:16] Lee: Don't worry it doesn't matter. Were you able to rescue anything else from this plane?

Piggott: No that was it, we got out what we could at the time because the pilot, whoever he was, didn't want sea water in any of his equipment so what could be ripped out was ripped out before the sea claimed it. We got all his personal gear out because that was loose stowed anyway. Some of the equipment was sealed in; we just got what we could. What a day that was.

[Part 1 0:47:58] Lee: And of course, you had extra people on base then.

Piggott: Yea, I suppose the strange thing about it all was that nobody felt as though it was like nowadays, a car crash. You don't stand round there worried about everything. It was something that just happened, and we all walked away from it. Nothing we could do. We were all young lads anyway, no females in those days of course.

[Part 1 0:48:38] Lee: You said at the beginning that you were almost tearful when you realised what you'd let yourself in for. At what point in the process in your first year did that go away and the excitement take over?

Piggott: I think it was within weeks of landing at the base. There was too much to do initially anyway because the *Biscoe*, you'll have heard this before anyway. The first thing it does is land supplies for a year or more. It's all hands to the pump, you do nothing more than put a box on your back and trail it up to the hut and get it into storage. Hundreds and hundreds of them, it took days and days and days. You just got into the work. Well I forgot Mum and just got stuck in because I'd not only got that along with all the other lads on the base of course, but I got to learn what was going on in the radio cabin as well. So time was filled. Not much time for sleeping I'm afraid because one of things we had to do was to identify which boxes had got any glass bottles in them because there was every likelihood that if there was a frost all night which there would be, those bottles could break. That meant that we'd be out of vinegar or whatever was in the bottles. Certainly no champagne and beer was in cans [laughs]. It was fairly early on when I realised that there was nothing to worry about. I was getting to grips with the job. I was still a bit worried about the job itself but not homesick anymore. These lads, they got on ever so well together from the word go. There were no cliques, there was no acrimony, there was no disliking anybody, we were just a group of lads all doing different things. Normally it was in the evening after the evening meal when we came together into the living room and talked or listened to music or read books because we had a fairly good library. That's when Shackleton became my hero actually. We had two doctors initially; Alex and Colin. Both were 2nd lieutenants in the ⁷RAMC if I'm not mistaken. Colin moved on after a while, but Alex stayed with us. He along with one of the meteorologists Geoff Roe who I understand was killed in a motorcycle accident and was a great friend of Barry Shaw, were forever provoking some kind of debate.

[Part 1 0:52:14] Lee: Alex Cummings?

Piggott: Cummings, that's the one, he was a great fellow, a Scot, I think had a home on the western isles somewhere, very sympathetic. That was one of the things that they did that was awful for [inaudible]. They used to conduct these physiological experiments; you stuck your hand in a bucket of iced water and kept it there for 20 minutes. By the time your hand came out it just wasn't my hand at all, it was someone else's. Or you wore what looked like a string vest, but it wasn't, it was wires, meshed wires all the way front and back. It's a dam cold thing attached to some kind of temperature gadget. The doctor would come up every

⁷ Royal Army Medical Corps

now and again and take the temperature of this thing. Looking at body warmth I suppose.

[Part 1 0:53:22] Lee: Was it voluntary participation on your behalf or did you have not much choice?

Piggott: No, no the doctor said 'Alan you're going to do it' and that was me volunteering if you'd like to put it that way. We just took it in our stride.

[Part 1 0:53:40] Lee: You had these debates. What sort of subjects would you debate?

Piggott: I remember one particular one, Geoff and Alex arguing about selfishness. One of them was saying that even Jesus Christ was selfish. I suppose he was referring to the day that Christ took the whip to the money lenders because he regarded that the place where they were lending money as being holy ground. This was an argument, Martin joined in. Frankly I just listened. But I was absolutely thrilled to listen to all these different sides to one argument.

[Part 1 0:54:45] Lee: Was it erudite the conversation?

Piggott: Yes, very much so. There must have been 5 or 6 of them involved with their own sides to the argument, which turned out to be absolutely inconclusive at the end because it was really just a matter of everyone having their own opinion anyway. I do remember that it was significant to me. It just stuck in my memory. Only a week or so ago I had an email from Doncaster council which was concerned with the behaviour of district council and parish council members and they exalted to abide by what's called the Nolan Principles in public life, honesty, integrity. One of the Nolan Principles was selflessness. And for the life of me I cannot imagine anybody being selfless except on occasion. But there's no way that they can conduct their entire lives being completely selfless. It can't be done, in my opinion [laughs]. When I read this document, I thought 'crikey Alex, I remember that argument now'. I suppose there were other things that they talked about.

[Part 1 0:57:05] Lee: What were the things they didn't talk about? Interestingly religion was frequently taboo on bases for obvious reasons.

Piggott: I've got a feeling that that was ignored, they didn't bother. Same with politics, they didn't bother with that. They talked a lot about music. Because they were, I wouldn't actually call them highbrow, but certainly some of the lads down there gave me an introduction to some

of the classics, the popular classics and I ended up buying quite a lot of LP's from Stanley for in the second and third year so that I could play them privately in the WT office. There was always someone with a record player somewhere in the hut that would play music. One of the things that I used to really enjoy was Albert Schweitzer playing Bach. I don't know how I came to do that; I just enjoy organ music. For me it's a sound.

[Part 1 0:58:31] Lee: Albert Schweitzer, the missionary?

Piggott: Yes

[Part 1 0:58:35] Lee: He played the organ. I didn't know that. Were you taking part in these discussions? You mention earlier that you were reserved?

Piggott: I was more on the edge

[Part 1 0:58:46] Lee: Did you come out of your shell at all?

Piggott: Not really, because that's the kind of person that I was. I was certainly listening. I was certainly taking it all in. I was certainly, I suppose, forming private opinions about what was being said. What I am saying Chris is that I'm not a particularly good mixer. I'm ok one to one; I'm ok one to another two. If you take a crowd, I'm quiet, I'd rather listen and believe me I am a good listener. I'm not one of these people who lets things float just past me. I listen to what people say to me or what is said to each other. I've always described myself since that time as being a sort of observer of people's behaviour. I like to see the body language; I like to hear what they have to say. Not that it means too much, but it tells me something at the time I suppose

[Part 1 0:59:51] Lee: You served under three different base leaders?

Piggott: Yes

[Part 1 0:59:55] Lee: So, what were your observations about being a base leader? Did you spot good trends and poor trends?

Piggott: The first one, Keith Bell, I was too inexperienced to make any judgement about it. Until the day that he came and said, 'Alan you're the electrician', and I thought well he must think something about me if it's not just the fact that I deal in electrical or electronic equipment. Since I did a job without having to go back to ask him for advice too many times, I felt at the end of it, his confidence in me was perhaps

justified. Second year was Mr Murray. Nice enough chap, surveyor. I had difficulty making my mind up about him. I can't form any opinion about that. I remember him well; I remember his joviality. I remember the way he got on easily with people including me, but I don't remember having too much contact with him even though we were a close-knit community. Third year was Bob Harkness and I can remember one feeling quite early on in that year that having had two years' experience, that I hadn't been approached to be base leader in the third year. It was a temporary thing because when Bob came, he was a super fellow and we got on extremely well together. I had every confidence in him being the base leader and certainly I never felt an ounce of jealousy about the job he was doing. I suppose in the end I was grateful that I didn't get the job. So that was that.

[Part 1 1:02:38] Lee: Were there tensions from time to time?

Piggott: Yes. Second year or third year the doctor and I didn't hit it off. It wasn't Colin and it wasn't Alex, it was the third doctor. This would be 1961 I think Chris

[Part 1 1:03:27] Lee: Interestingly there's no mention of him. I've noticed before now they leave people out who didn't quite fit

Piggott: I don't like the way you said that

[Part 1 1:03:42] Lee: You're in here [laughs]. There's no medical officer mentioned at all. In '61

Piggott: What about '60 were there medical officers there?

[Part 1 1:03:56] Lee: Sparke

Piggott: That's him

[Part 1 1:03:59] Lee: B.R.Sparke

Piggott: Brian. It must have been '60 then. Sorry if I can't get the year right

[Part 1 1:04:05] Lee: It's not a problem at all. That's what this book's useful for.

Piggott: Brian had a habit of wherever he went, inside or outside the hut; he always left the door open. Always! My WT office was the end room right next door to the door that went outside. I suffered Brian long enough and one day I got so angry that once again he'd left the door

open. He'd gone to feed the dogs which were about 50 yards away and when he came back, I'd locked the door. He banged on the door and I took no damn notice. So he was forced to walk the whole way round to the other end of the hut to come in which he did and brought a snowball with him which he cracked on my head. Well I retaliated fairly meekly I suppose, sat there fuming for a while and I thought 'this ain't going to go on'. I went down to where he had his little room and surgery and knocked on the door. He shouted, 'come in'. I opened the door, went in, closed the door and said, 'look Brian, this has got to stop' I said, 'you don't realise just how cold it can get up that end of the hut'. That's when Brian admitted that he'd got a fault and we apologised to each other. Fortunately, that was the end of the matter because from then on Brian closed the door. We were good friends after that, in fact I was out skiing one day, learning to ski, fell over and we had these big mittens on our hands. When I got up, I felt something was wrong. When I took the mitten off this thumb was back here. It was completely dislocated. No blood, no pain, it was just so cold. I went back to the hut. I said, 'Brian look at this, can you do anything with this?' The first thing he did was he gets a book out [laughs] unbelievable. You could see his mind working 'how do I do this, how do I do this?' He said 'yea I can fix that Alan'. He said 'stand behind me' which I did. 'Put your hand underneath my arm between my arm and your body' which I did. This was so I couldn't see what was going to happen. 'Right are you ready?' I said 'Yea. It's cold anyway; I can't feel a thing Brian'. So he yanked it, turned it, put it back, Bob's your uncle it was done. It's quite funny actually

[Part 1 1:07:38] Lee: Did it hurt when it warmed up?

Piggott: No it didn't, not a bit. I never had any aftereffects except that I feel sometimes that this knuckle is not quite where it ought to be, but it's not given me a problem in later life. Wonderful

[Part 1 1:07:55] Lee: Let's pause for a moment and continue in a moment's time.

Piggott: Sure

[Part 2 0:00:00] Lee: This is Alan Piggott interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 11th June 2012. Alan Piggott part two.

[Part 2 0:00:09] Lee: Were you at Argentine island continuously for 3 years or did you come back from ??? [inaudible]

Piggott: No continuous. I was on the *Biscoe* in September 1958. I arrived back home in June 1962. It's almost 4 years

[Part 2 0:00:32] Lee: You may not realise this but it's very unusual for anybody to do 3 years in a row

Piggott: Yes, I know it is. I read an article in the BAS magazine which named someone who has been the longest consecutive member and I thought 'that's not quite true'. I was there a bit longer than he was; just one of those things. It was while I was in the second year that I was enjoying it. What's the name of the secretary in Stanley, Green?

[Part 2 0:01:17] Lee: Johnny Green

Piggott: Johnny Green. I consulted the base leader first and said, 'look I'd like to stay a third year'. And he agreed and he sent a signal off to John. The answer came back 'yes ok if you want to, you can do a third year'. That was it.

[Part 2 0:01:38] Lee: What were you enjoying?

Piggott: It wasn't just one thing; I think it was everything. I was enjoying not necessarily the cold weather, but certainly the summer weather. I was enjoying the camaraderie of the people that I was based with. I was enjoying the routine; I'd come to grips with the job that I had to do and was getting good at it. Even the other things like as I mentioned earlier, the days that it was my job to empty the toilet. I didn't mind that at all because of lots of things that go with it. I was learning other things as well. In a sense Chris I think I was still growing up. I learned a few chords on the guitar. I learned more about music, jazz, folk, classical; not a lot but enough for me. I learned a lot about Antarctic history; I read the books that were there in the library. Towards the end I was probably a bit more outgoing than I was when I first started there in January by the time, I arrived at the beginning of the first year. So, there were all these things, and then on a one to one basis, if you could get people talking about themselves that was interesting 'where have you been, where are you going?' A lot of these lads, after their stint down there would very often go abroad. Harry Agger for example, one of the two physicists, ended up living in California as far as I know. Still a good friend of Barry Shaw's and we keep saying to one another we'll meet sometime but that's been going on for about 4 years now and never happened. Chris taught me to play chess. These were great things for a young man, and I enjoyed them so much so there was some motivation there for me to stay there and continue.

[Part 2 0:04:28] Lee: Had you lost interest in the outside world? Did you keep abreast of world affairs?

Piggott: Yea I think we did. I think we were introspective to the Argentine islands and the people that we were. There wasn't a lot of chance of finding out what was going on in the outside world because certainly through the winter months radio reception was very poor anyway. There was a programme that was deliberately intended for the bases down there that was broadcast in which we were given personal appearances of some relatives, and all the lads down there took it in turn to receive something from their mother, father, brother, sister. It was only two minutes worth but it was like a greeting to say 'everything's ok, hope you're ok' and all the rest of it. I had an old, it wasn't old it was brand new; it was a Grundig tape recorder with big spools on it.

[Part 2 0:05:51] Lee: You'd taken that with you had you?

Piggott: No, I bought it when I was down there.

[Part 2 0:05:55] Lee: In Stanley?

Piggott: Yea. So I thought it would be a good idea to record these programmes as we received them, not with the equipment that you see today. It was simply the art of the speaker on top of the receiver to the microphone attached to the tape recorder. I recorded quite a lot of them and eventually sent them back to the BBC so that they could get some idea of how we were receiving them on these bases in Graham Land. I think they were very grateful. I don't think they made that much of it. I suppose their technology in 1962'ish was as advanced as it could be at that time, but certainly nothing like it is today. They simply returned the tapes to me with a thank you letter and that was the end of the matter.

[Part 2 0:07:00] Lee: Did you receive a message?

Piggott: I think I got two, one in '61 and one in '62 and again it was my mother and one of my sisters just to say, 'Hello Alan, hope you're ok love, looking forward to you coming home'. All you can do is listen you can't respond to it. But it was nice to hear their voices. My Dad never, he wouldn't, he was almost house bound anyway. But it was quite pleasant, and I used to arrange it so in the early days everybody on the base would come into the shack just to listen to the program. We were

all very, very quiet while the messages were coming through. Eventually I managed to wire a speaker from the receiver 2 or 3 doors down into the sitting room so that they could listen to them there. There was no loss of quality between the WT shack and the living room so the lads could sit comfortably. It's one of those things, there's no privacy anywhere so if I'm receiving a message there could be 10 lads stood behind me listening to the same message

[Part 2 0:08:35] Lee: So it was never embarrassing was it?

Piggott: Oh no never embarrassing

[Part 2 0:08:37] Lee: Some of the Fids found it quite embarrassing at times

Piggott: Really? Certainly it wasn't for me. I just thought it was nice to hear my mother's voice

[Part 2 0:08:47] Lee: Interestingly in this modern day and age where you can pick up a phone and ring home that program still exists; once a year on mid-winters day. The winterers all gather round the radio receiver at Halley and listen to it.

Piggott: Mind you I would expect that the quality of reception and transmission at Halley Bay, because of the modern equipment, is much better than it was.

[Part 2 0:09:15] Lee: It depends on the atmospherics really

Piggott: Yes of course it does

[Part 2 0:09:21] Lee: But you didn't hear the world service at all or pick up news from other sources? You weren't aware of the growing tensions in around Cuba?

Piggott: I suppose I must have been, but I don't remember

[Part 2 0:09:32] Lee: ??? [inaudible] the space race?

Piggott: I don't remember much about it. One of the things that I was keen to do was Amateur Radio. I got a licence as a radio ham from Stanley. I would wait until probably 10 or 11 o'clock at night even in winter and it was surprising what you can pick up. I was picking ham operators up in Canada, Eastern Europe, Australia. It was wonderful to talk to them. In fact we had a regular schedule actually along with Halley Bay and a chap who lived in Timaru in New Zealand, I can't remember his name

unfortunately. I would listen to Halley Bay and Timaru because my equipment and my transmission had a lot further to go than the Halley Bay one up to New Zealand. But occasionally I talked to this gentleman but very often the signal just went down and down and down during the transmission

[Part 2 0:11:01] Lee: Voice or Morse?

Piggott: Voice as far as we could because I don't think the gent in Timaru had Morse experience. He had some wonderful equipment, just listening to him was as clear as a bell until atmospherics took over.

[Part 2 0:11:23] Lee: Were you able to reach the UK?

Piggott: On one odd occasion I did, and it was someone in West Yorkshire, but I don't remember the details.

[Part 2 0:11:33] Lee: But you weren't in regular communication with your Mum?

Piggott: No, no I wasn't. There was a chap, an American who lived up by the Great Lakes, Minnesota. I suppose maybe because the way the aerial was turned, I was able to talk to him a little bit more than I was with others. I remember one occasion when we had on base a little, what's called a 68 set which was carried around in a haversack. It's only this big, only 18 inches high, 12 inches wide and there was a great big stuffy battery in the bottom. I attached a key to that and started plugging away to look for any response. Believe it or not this little 68 set was bringing responses from America left, right and centre. It was glorious; I could sit there all night just receiving these stations. The reason for this was because our call signs in the Antarctic began with the letters VP, I was VP8EE. A lot of radio hams round the world spent a lot of time trying to collect different call signs. Ours was a fairly rare one. Having started it I could end up with a queue of North American radio hams wanting to make contact just to say, 'have you received my signal?' We'd send them a printed card saying 'you've been in touch with VP8EE'; wonderful stuff. And the other thing that I used to listen to quite a lot was, there was a program that came out of Argentina; a superb guitarist called Eduardo Falu. Whenever I could I used to tune into his programme and just listen to him playing the guitar, fantastic stuff, absolutely wonderful.

[Part 2 0:14:11] Lee: And the reception was good enough to listen to as far as the guitar was concerned?

Piggott: Some of it was but conditions for radio reception were different between summer and winter. Winter everything went down the toilet but in summer things could be better. Even so it could be difficult according to distance, but we got quite a lot. Not too much voice because with these receivers that we had, I think there was probably a lot of interference with coded Morse signals coming across and what we used to call carrier waves. You'd be listening to something and suddenly this great big whistling came up that destroyed the signal that you were listening to. That was the end of it as far as you were concerned.

[Part 2 0:15:09] Lee: Rather unusually, and you're the first person to mention this in my experience of doing these interviews, you were obliged to sit there and take down the entire Antarctic treaty by Morse code.

Piggott: Yes

[Part 2 0:15:25] Lee: Tell me about that experience

Piggott: Was this 1959 or '60? I'm not sure which year it was; it was fairly early on, I think. All the radio operators were warned that Stanley was going to send us a copy of the recently signed Antarctic Treaty. We were also warned that it was a pretty long document. Because I was the only base to send the results of the radiosonde upper atmosphere observations, I arranged with Stanley that they might send me the Antarctic Treaty immediately after I'd sent that observation and I would record it on my tape recorder. I asked them to send it fast; I recorded it at high speed on my tape recorder, and then at my leisure I could alter the speed of the tape so I could listen to it at the speed that I could understand and then take it down from there, which I did over quite a few days actually [laughs]. Because like most things like this, it was couched in civil service type language but the gist of it was interesting. I quite proudly took it, after I'd written it out, took it to the base leader and said 'well, it's the Antarctic Treaty'. A great big wad of signal pats, it was great that.

[Part 2 0:17:18] Lee: Did anybody read it?

Piggott: I read it that's for sure and I think the base leader did. But apart from that I don't think anyone else was very interested

[Part 2 0:17:29] Lee: Were there other messages that you took; crises, medical situations, personal problems that you can talk about? Any disasters? Presumably you had to send a signal back saying the Beaver had sunk, didn't you?

Piggott: Oh yea, but that would be done by the base leader in code for Stanley and I wouldn't even know what this code was about; it was just a report really. The Beaver had gone, that was the end of it.

[Part 2 0:18:00] Lee: What about other significant issues?

Piggott: I'm not sure I remember very many, if any to be honest. There might have been the odd occasion and I must admit I'm only guessing, when some member of one of our lad's family had perhaps passed away or was ill or something like that. I think that's as serious as it got. The one thing that we did listen to, I've just got to get this right. There was someone with toothache at one of the more northern bases, and we had a doctor. Our doctor had to supervise the yanking out of this tooth because that was the only remedy.

[Part 2 0:19:04] Lee: By Morse code?

Piggott: No. There's an evening programme. When the ships come down which is in summer of course and reception is much better; at 9 o'clock I think it was, 8 o'clock perhaps in the evening all the bases would set up on 3.8 or whatever at this particular frequency, and we had what's called 'The Goon Show'. This meant that the ship whether it was the *Biscoe*, the *Shackleton*, one of the American ones or the *Kista Dan* or whatever would all tune in and someone would start it off. 'Where are you? When will you be arriving at Base F?' We'd get a response from the ship and then that meant that after that, some of the other bases could chip in asking similar questions or the bases could talk between themselves. It was quite handy actually. One of the things we did at base F was we decided we were going to put a play together which we did. From memory it was called *The Dear Departed* and I remember Barry and Harry, Geoff and myself all having parts in this play.

[Part 2 0:21:01] Lee: Did you write it yourselves?

Piggott: Oh no it was something taken from a book somewhere. I think we made a reasonable fist of it but of course we were all stupid amateurs. But having said that we really enjoyed it and we recorded it. And then we put it out on the Goon Show [laughs] I remember people saying, 'well it was something to listen to if nothing else'. It was great. It's the kind of thing that we did.

[Part 2 0:21:44] Lee: But you never had to send messages of disaster or tragedy or serious illness?

Piggott: Not that I recall. The more serious one was the Beaver going in. I may have forgotten something Chris, but I don't actually remember at the moment.

[Part 2 0:21:58] Lee: What about visiting parties? Did the Chileans or the Argentineans ever come and see you?

Piggott: We never had any foreign visitors to the best of my knowledge, but we did once have a visit by helicopter from HMS *Protector* and Clive made some of his booby-trapped buns

[Part 2 0:22:24] Lee: What were those?

Piggott: These were donuts filled with jam.

[Part 2 0:22:30] Lee: Clive Pearson?

Piggott: Yea. Now when you stuck your teeth into one of these the jam came out all over the naval uniform [laughs] and they saw it as good fun. I think on one occasion the Gooner actually came down as well with them just to have a look round the base and off again. They don't last very long these things, an hour or so and that's it.

[Part 2 0:23:06] Lee: Americans? *Northwind*, *Westwind*?

Piggott: ⁸*Northwind*, *Westwind*, *Southwind*, *Eastwind*, they had them all didn't they? We had one of them, could have been *Northwind*. They're a funny lot are the Americans. They don't seem to realise that they don't recognise danger. The *Northwind* would moor somewhere at a safe distance from the island; lower a boat, motor it in. I always remember this fella in the back of the boat. There was no beach just rocks rising out of the water, sloping up to a height of 10 or 12 feet. This sailor throws the rope at one of us from his boat and says, 'tie that on somewhere will you friend' There was nowhere to tie it to because it was all solid rock and he couldn't see it. So, we just held onto this rope and brought them ashore. There's quite a difference actually in discipline in the American Navy and the British Navy. It's funny really.

[Part 2 0:24:44] Lee: What was it like having Americans on the base? Did they get the jam donut treatment?

⁸ American icebreakers which served in the United States Coast Guard

Piggott: No, they didn't but one of the things that they always did was; the Americans were good at gadgets. They had a gadget for everything. They're also good at showing off so you got a bit sick of them after a while. There was one American, he actually sailed down with us, he was coming as an observer just for a look round. He invited one of our members to play chess. He mated in 3 or 4 moves; it was incredible. But at that time, I didn't understand what chess was all about. There was another chap 'have you seen this, have you seen this?' and he'd bring out some sort of gadget. 'This is for the cold weather in the Antarctic, it keeps your hands warm' or something. We'd just be wearing gloves and mittens. Fantastic. I'm not all that keen on Americans Chris

[Part 2 0:25:57] Lee: We'll move on, shall we? The hut was extended at some time during your term

Piggott: Yes, it was. I volunteered to help Jim Shirtcliffe to build it.

[Part 2 0:26:07] Lee: Did he come down specifically to do that?

Piggott: Yes, I think he did.

[Part 2 0:26:12] Lee: It was his forte wasn't it?

Piggott: Oh yes, he's a great man. Very solid, very knowledgeable, down to earth and a damn good builder at that. Jim spent a lot of time towards the end of winter putting the pilings in. Temperatures for base F were pretty extreme; but he got them done. Most of the hut of course was sectionalised and I helped him the best I could. We got the shell up and then we were doing all the woodwork, the timber work inside and it was really just an extension of the corridor down the centre of the hut with rooms off either side. We had some special equipment coming down and I don't know what it was. But I know the chap who was supposed to run it was called Geoff Thompson and he was a lazy so and so; he was in bed nearly all day long. Anyway, Jim and I, and maybe from time to time helped by others, we got the shell up and then we started building the inside. The cladding on the walls, it was a like a thinnish type of asbestos, but it wasn't asbestos. It was very thin just to go on the outside and then you paint it. There were hundreds of these sheets of 8 x4 of whatever it was which we stacked up against one part of the woodwork inside the hut. At the point where Jim wanted to start putting these sheets to the walls, to the framework, he asked me to go and get one, the first one. I duly went to the pile as it stood up and I had trouble in separating it from the rest. I struggled with it and eventually

it ended up the whole pile, the thickness about this there must have been 40 or 50 sheets of this stuff, fell over and I tried to hold them back and shouted for Jim. Jim came but the two of us couldn't hold it and eventually it collapsed on top of both of us. Our legs were trapped. After shouting for help for several minutes we got the help that we needed; someone lifted them off and I was ok, a little bit of sprain but nothing (...) Jim's leg was broken. Fortunately, we had got a doctor on base and he ended up in plaster and the work on the extension stopped for quite some time because he just couldn't do it. But I always blame myself for that, mind you the things weren't stacked right in the first place. They were stacked near vertical so that if you touched any of them it would be easy for them to fall over.

[Part 2 0:29:45] Lee: Tell me a bit more about Jim, what sort of worker was he?

Piggott: Hard. He knew his stuff and he was there every minute of daylight. Bear in mind that the evenings could be quite long, he would still be there. He rarely took any time off.

[Part 2 0:30:05] Lee: Was there much time for recreation?

Piggott: On and off for most of us. Whatever jobs we had to do we did even though the work might be in the evening but whenever you weren't doing that and you weren't on any other duties like cooking or cleaning or anything like that, yea you enjoyed yourself in recreation.

[Part 2 0:30:31] Lee: So, you went out skiing, you did some boating. Did you become a proficient skier?

Piggott: I was a lousy skier.

[Part 2 0:30:40] Lee: Did it matter?

Piggott: No, I was frightened of it actually. Some of the others, Harry for instance, he was really good at it. He'd got a better sense of balance than I had. One of my problems was that when I arrived there, I was a 9 stone weakling, I was very thin. All the time because of Clive's and Tony's and whoever's cooking I gradually put on some weight and eventually I got a nickname myself. I was called El Gordo, the fat one, because I really did put it on. I think that didn't help with the skiing practice.

[Part 2 0:31:31] Lee: But you managed to get away occasionally. There's a trip to Petermann Island

Piggott: There was a hut on Petermann Island that was owned by the Argentineans, disused for long periods, and 3 of us, Walter, Frazer and myself decided with the base leaders permission to go on holiday. We were only talking about one night. We manhandled the sledge the 5 or 6 miles up to Petermann Island, off load [phonetic] and spent the night there. Petermann island itself is a domed island. Frazer and Walter decided the following day before we set on back that they were going to climb it. Now I don't have a head for heights, so I stayed at low level whilst they did the climb. After that we just hauled it all the way back again. But it was nice to have a break. Some of the lads Martin, I think Bob was one of them, there might have been one or two more, decided that they would like to get across the sea ice to Cape Tuscon which was part of the mainland of Graham Land. That really was a hike across the sea ice in winter and then climb up the Cape itself which they did. It took a day or two to do it. Very intrepid, that's where the word comes from

[Part 2 0:33:22] Lee: All of this in pretty stunning and spectacular landscape?

Piggott: Oh yes. The peace of it was profound, it really was. I could put my skis on and climb up to the top of the hill at the back of the hut, which would probably take me up about 100 feet above sea level. From there you could see the landscape of quite a long piece of Graham Land itself, the mountains. To stand there on a summers evening and first of all see the scenery as it gets bathed in sunlight as the sun's going down, and it starts to turn crimson. But more than that, you suddenly realise there's not a sound in the air and it's absolutely wonderful! You could say deafening, but it wasn't, it was so quiet, it was absolutely unbelievable; with the sea mirrored, absolutely calm, beautiful. At the beginning of summer when the ice is beginning to break up you start to see the penguins coming back. That is a sight to see as well because they're in lines all the way going south past the island. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds in this line and then hundreds more in that line, and then hundreds more crossing them. If you look from the top of the island, you've got this big sea ice between us and the mainland, you watch the little black lines going past. You wonder first of all what they were until you realise that that's it. But it's fantastic. And as the ice breaks up so the seals start to come onto the flows. You can have a decent size flow, about the size of this bungalow with 30 or 40 seals on it just laying there in the sunshine. What a great sight.

[Part 2 0:36:04] Lee: Did you ever have any philosophical or spiritual or religious contemplations whilst you were down there?

Piggott: Yea, wouldn't want to call them philosophical. When I was 16, 17 before I went into the RAF, I had a girlfriend who was the daughter of the curate of our local church. He was a superb man, a really honest man and eventually I went to confirmation classes. This was 17, 18 years old. That was the beginning of my serious thinking about religion. The relationship with the girl stopped but my conviction carried on. I think in those moments when I was outside the hut looking round, I think I felt something of the power of it all. I suppose I've always argued since then, I am a firm believer, I do believe in God. But how did we all come about, and this is the big argument these days isn't it? What caused the big bang? My answer is simple, because I am a simple person anyway. But I certainly wouldn't argue with the scientists. It was during those moments and those hours that I would be wondering round the outside of the hut that my religious thoughts gained strength in some ways. Politics no, I never even considered that. Philosophy, there was a book; Bob Thomas one of the Met people. Russell the famous philosopher Chris?

[Part 2 0:38:41] Lee: Bertrand Russell

Piggott: That's the one Bertrand Russell. The book, oh it was a great big thing it was. Bob Thomas; I would like to have read it. He'd picked it up from our library anyway. I said to Bob one day 'I'd like to read that when you've finished with it please'. Well it took him nearly 12 months [laughs] and I never got round to reading it but I would love to have done.

[Part 2 0:39:11] Lee: It's not too late

Piggott: No, no, I might even look for it on my kindle. You never know.

[Part 2 0:39:21] Lee: Can you expand a little bit then; would you feel the presence of a creator in the Antarctic?

Piggott: Yes. I'll give you one example.

[Part 2 0:39:31] Lee: Please

Piggott: 1974 we moved to Doncaster. I was appointed as the registrar at what was then the Doncaster College of Technology. During that first year of being in Doncaster I contracted gastric flu. I was off work. We were staying in a maisonette because we hadn't yet bought our own house. I was running upstairs to the loo almost every 10, 15 minutes. It was a

terrible experience. Whether you believe this or not after doing this for several days a voice said, 'go in peace'. I'm a little bit embarrassed to say that because I've never shared it with anybody but from that moment on, I was OK. It was incredible. For me it was a miracle. Simple

[Part 2 0:41:18] Lee: Had anything of that nature at all happened whilst you were in the Antarctic? Had you sensed the creator around you in the landscape?

Piggott: No. I'd thought about it a lot because of the beauty of the place but not only that but the incredible cruelty of the place as well having read some of the books. You think there's something behind this. I remember, I think we were on the *Shackleton*, I'd finally finished my 3 years and we were going a bit further south before we were due to go back to Stanley. We were parked off somewhere north of Stonington. Several of us were sat in the ward or sitting room or whatever it's called on the *Shackleton*, and suddenly we heard this enormous bang. In fact, it was the keel of the ship that had touched bottom. No damage was done to the ship but of course it panicked us a bit, we were all on deck in an instant. At that moment the wind blew up and this was a wind! There were ice flows, the captain had got the ship moving, taken her to safer water, but there were ice flows going past the ship it was moving that fast was the current. I thought to myself 'this is it; this is the end. No, it isn't, God's here' But the incredible force of this movement of ice it really got to me. And there was another incident as well. It was during winter a storm blew up and this really was a storm. It was the worst we'd ever suffered for what was known locally as The Banana Belt. The Met lads said, 'the wind is really strong, you ought to come and see this'. We got clobbered up and I stood at the bottom end of the hut and it was really difficult to even open your eyes because the wind was coming straight into your face. I remember Martin said, 'look over there'. Now about a quarter of a mile away there was another island which was again domed and its height above sea level must have been 50 or 60 feet and the waves were breaking over it. What a sight that was. Unfortunately, you couldn't take a camera to it, nor could you see it except in occasional blinks. Oh my goodness it was fantastic.

[Part 2 0:44:56] Lee: You came back to the UK and it looks like you had a life of administration.

Piggott: Yes. I got back in '62 and by this time I'd made my peace with Bradford Education Authority I suppose. I rang my old chief clerk and said, 'Mr Clarkson I'm looking for a job, can you help me?' He said, 'give me a day or two to think about it Alan'. I think that was

deliberate to make me suffer because I didn't go back when I should have done at 18. He did come back to me and said, 'look we've got a vacancy at the Bradford Technical College. If you go up and see Mr Coultard the registrar, he'll tell you about it and he'll interview you and if its ok with him you can have the job.' So, I did go, had an interview and was set on. From then I think ambition set in. I thought 'well I can do this job. I've looked at other jobs that are going on in this office and I think I can do some of them as well.' Eventually a vacancy came up at Keithley Technical College in the West Riding and I applied for that and got it. I spent a couple of years there and then there was an advertisement for Chief Administrative Officer at the Co-operative College near Loughborough. I applied for that, went for an interview, left it with them and came home. I let 2 weeks go by and said to Sue 'we haven't heard anything they don't want us, but I'll just ring to find out if there is any news.' So, I rang the Education secretary Mr Fox and he said, 'we're waiting to hear from you,' I said, 'I beg your pardon?' He said, 'we've sent you a letter offering you the job.' I said, 'sorry I haven't got it.' Then it struck me I said 'look did you take notice of the application that I wrote to you, that I would be on holiday in Tenby, South Wales from one date to another. And now I'm back home.' 'Hang on a minute' he said. 'Ah yes' he said 'we've sent the offer to Tenby. When can you start?' So that same day the house was up for sale and the resignation was in. From Co-operative college, and I felt as though my career still lay in local authority further education, so I applied for and got a job at Grimsby. I held that for a couple of years and then applied for the job of Registrar at Lancaster College which I got.

[Part 2 0:48:17] Lee: All this is like chalk and cheese you being in the Antarctic isn't it? It's a completely different lifestyle

Piggott: Absolutely

[Part 2 0:48:22] Lee: So how do those three years in the Antarctic rate in your lifetime as a whole?

Piggott: Never to be forgotten. Absolutely. I've got to admit a certain gratitude that you came here this afternoon because you've dredged quite a lot of it up that I hadn't remembered, and I don't want to forget. That was an experience of a lifetime Chris I can tell you. I think what happened towards the end was that as I was growing up there came a realisation that at some point I would have to settle down and on returning to the UK it wasn't long, it was only a week or two before I met Sue. At the time she was coming up to her 17th birthday and I thought 'this is it, it's

time to settle down.’ And we did. So, career took over but there had been moments, not lately I must admit, when I’ve wondered about going back. But it’s never happened, nor would I now of course, I’m far too old for that. Those are 3 years that I wouldn’t like to forget ever, ever, ever, ever. The friends that I had, the people that I met. The sadness is that I suppose one after another we are all popping off now unfortunately and if it were the case of a reunion where I knew for certain that some of the lads that I lived with for 3 years were going to be there then I might be attracted by the idea. To mix with people that I don’t know is just not my cup of tea. Not at all.

[Part 2 0:50:41] Lee: Let’s leave it there. Alan thank you very much indeed

Piggott: Any good?

[Part 2 0:50:46] Lee: Very good

[Part 2 0:50:48]

<ENDS>

Possible Extracts:

- Introduction to Morse code in the RAF [Part 1 0:07:10]
- Being ‘sussed out’ psychologically on journey south [Part 1 0:19:58]
- The early days and Morse code experiences [Part 1 0:27:03]
- The accident with the Beaver aircraft [Part 1 0:41:45]
- Describing the physiological experiments [Part 1 0:52:14]
- Listening to debates with fellow Fids [Part 1 0:53:40]
- Disagreements with the doctor and dislocating his thumb [Part 1 1:04:05]
- Describing contact with radio hams [Part 2 0:09:32]
- Recording the Antarctic Treaty by Morse code [Part 2 0:15:09]
- Extending the hut [Part 2 0:25:57]
- Relationship with God and being in the Antarctic [Part 2 0:36:04]