

RONALD PINDER

Edited transcript of interview with Ron Pinder conducted by Chris Eldon-Lee at Cambridge BAS Club Reunion on 7 July, 2012. BAS Archives Ref: AD6/24/1/179/1. Transcribed by Neil MacPherson on 21/02/2018.

Pinder: Ronald Pinder, born Catford, south London, 1932, 30th June.

[0:00:17] Lee: Would you say your father was an educated man?

Pinder: Never knew anything about him.

[0:00:22] Lee: You never knew about him?

Pinder: No, nothing at all.

[0:00:25] Lee: Right, because you were a foster child, weren't you, with Barnardo's?

Pinder: The position was that I was born in south London, I lived with my mother and her parents for 2 years. She got the TB and she died and the grandparents couldn't look after me so then I went in to Barnardo's. That was in 1933, '34. And then I went to a foster home in Kent. That was fine, it was great, but unfortunately when I got there was the foster mother, foster father, granddad living next door and a foster brother. 6 years later there was just the foster mother and I. There was the war and the others just passed away very early, so life was a bit traumatic in a way I suppose. Although in many ways I had an ideal childhood 'cos I could roam the countryside in Kent and of course being of that age during the war you didn't worry about... you just watched the Battle of Britain and things without....

[0:01:52] Lee: In the sky.

Pinder: ... sky, without worrying about it. We weren't that far from West Malling.

[0:01:59] Lee: Do you have memories of the Barnardo's home?

Pinder: No, I was in what they called the babies' castle in Hawkhurst in Kent and my foster mother went there and sort of picked me out and took me away. I was only 18 months, 2 years old at that stage.

[0:02:19] Lee: What kind of schooling did you have, Ron? Were you good at school?

Pinder: No, not particularly. It was a Church of England school. You all went and you left at 14. When I was coming up to 14 my foster mother said 'Well, don't bother too much with the exams because even if you passed to go to Grammar School, there's no way I can afford to pay for you to go.' So, that was it. I was evacuated for 6 months down to Somerset and schooling there was we were 3 miles from the school and you soon realised that nobody really knew who you were, where you were, so you didn't bother to go to school. Go and tickle the trout in the local streams instead. So schooling was a bit ... In the last year we had an ex-army teacher come in and he soon sussed me out because he said... , I'd done something wrong, so I said 'Ah, well, that's the stick again.'

He said 'No it's not'.

I said 'Oh, not the stick?'

He said 'No. You'll be confined to the classroom this afternoon'.

I said ' Oh, we've got a football match'.

He said 'You're going to miss that, won't you?'

He soon sussed out that there were other ways to punish a child than hitting them, you know. Punishment didn't last, didn't make any difference - you got so used to the slipper and the stick but I was far more devastated not being able to play cricket or football or any other sport that happened to be about.

[0:04:21] Lee: So, when you left school, were you 14?

Pinder: No, I stayed on for a bit longer and I was actually 15 when I left.

[0:04:29] Lee: But no qualifications?

Pinder: No qualifications at all.

[0:04:31] Lee: So what on earth did you do, Ron?

Pinder: Ah well, Barnardo's decided that for some reason they would not allow me to stay with my foster mother. She was upset, so they found me a job as an apprentice shipwright in a company, the New Medway Steam Packet Company in Rochester, so I went to live in digs. I think I got paid 22 shillings and nine pence a week or something. But I got paid extra because I used to cycle to work. It was interesting but I soon discovered that I wasn't really cut out for this carpentry business. It was interesting. We had ships like *The Medway Queen*, *Queen of Kent*, *Royal Daffodil*, which had been to Dunkirk and places like that. So then I tried to find a way out and I decided to try and join the RAF as a boy entrant, which I did. When I joined up I think I was 15. When did I join up? 10th of the 2nd, 1948. It's funny how you remember these dates.

[0:06:04] Lee: Mmm..

Pinder: So I was 15 and about 8 months and I signed on for 8 years from when I was 18 and I took up training as a telegraphist. I went to RAF Compton Bassett, did some square bashing there. Well, I went to RAF Locking in Somerset and then ended up in Compton Bassett in Wiltshire. I was in what was the 3rd entry after the war. We had a bit of a ding-dong because it was great fun going into other peoples' billets and turning all the beds over and what have you. Amongst one of these melees I broke my ankle. That was very good 'cos they sent me off to hospital. I then went to a rehabilitation place at RAF Chessington. It was quite strange because I was with pilots and people from the war and what have you, and there was an organisation called 'Lest We Forget' run by mainly females and they used to get tickets for all the shows in London. They used to come round and pat me on the head and say 'You look very young to have been in the war'. [Laughs]. Then of course once that was over I had to go back to Compton Bassett, to the reality of the RAF.

[0:07:45] Lee: But they sent you abroad, didn't they , the RAF? To the continent.

Pinder: Yes, I went to Germany [in] 1950. Spent 2 and a half years in Germany, came back to England and did what we call ...I was on special sort of signals duties there. Came back to England, did normal station signals. I was in charge of a signals unit and I suddenly got a message to report to RAF Wythall in Birmingham. I saw this chap I'd met before. I think he was Ceylonese but he was a civilian and he held the rank of Squadron Leader. He said 'Come in, sit down. How would you like to go to Warsaw?'

Of course I thought 'Warsaw'?

He said 'WARSAW, Poland'.

'Yes'.

So we had a discussion and then I went to RAF Ruislip and from there I was in to London to what they called the Foreign Liaison Office which was right opposite the Houses of Parliament on the corner of Parliament Square and eventually I landed up in the British Embassy in Poland, in Warsaw. I must have been the highest paid corporal in the RAF. I had a maid, flat of my own, chauffeur driven to work. I had my own room in the embassy which nobody else came in. It was interesting.

[0:09:40] Lee: Were you living in the lap of luxury in a war-torn country? Was it rubble all around?

Pinder: There was rubble, yes. It was rubble all around. I mean it was the same as in Germany. We were in Hamburg and Essen and places like that. Yes, devastation all around. In Poland they

had had a big clear-up but there were areas that were still... What they used to do, they had a wall and they'd paint it, just paint the wall and of course when you went round the other side there wasn't anything.

[0:10:18] Lee: What were your duties in the Polish Embassy as a RAF Officer?

Pinder: No, no I was a Corporal still.

[0:10:25] Lee: Right.

Pinder: Nobody else knew what I did. The Air Attache, who was a Group Captain, never came into my room, he wasn't allowed in. It's alright now but I was I suppose what you would call a listening spy. In those days, when we were in Germany for example we were on this little camp and there was massive aerals and everything. I'll tell you a little story about it. In the evenings I used to go down to the canteen and grab a beer and have a little break. One of the lads came back and he took quite a while and he said 'This secrecy business is ... When I got down there, I got to the bar and you know little Annie behind the bar, she said "Meester Bernie, do not rush. The Germans, the Russians will still be sending their morse and you will still be able to listen to it when you get back upstairs." '. And in many ways the Embassy was very similar. When I arrived there I got everything in and lack of signals and what have you. I thought 'Oh, dear'. So I said to the Air Attache 'Got a problem here with the signals'.

He said 'Well, there's only one person. You'll have to fix it'.

I said 'I was down as a civilian, administration'.

To cut a long story short I had a word with the diplomatic wireless lads and they said 'No, that's your job'. So I had to go up on the roof and wriggle these aerals back up that had blown down. And you get up on the roof and there's East Germans there over that side and there's Japs and all the others and the Polish chap in the box taking photographs of you. So they knew more or less what you were up to.

[0:12:37] Lee: Did you speak Polish?

Pinder: No. No, that always puzzled me because I would have thought they would have got a Polish speaker but I think perhaps one of the reasons was that, if anything happened, you wouldn't be able to tell them anything anyway.

[0:12:5] Lee: What's your first recollection of being aware that there was a place called the Antarctic? Did you read books, see films?

Pinder: No. Oh yes, I was aware of the Antarctic. It never occurred to me until I'd come back to England, I'd worked in the Air Ministry in London, got demobbed and then I was working for British European Airways at London Airport and that was a pretty boring job. I knew the chap who worked at W H Smiths so I used to get a pile of magazines and sit there, 'cos I had nothing to do virtually, and I was going flipping through these and it said 'Wanted, Radio Mechanics, Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey, 18 months tour'. I thought 'That sounds better than this'. So I applied for it. I mean I knew where the Antarctic was and I knew where the Falklands were. Then I turned up at the Crown Agents in London and saw a chap called Bill Sloman, Sir Vivian Bunny Fuchs and his wife, Eleanor, Anne Todd.

[0:14:10] Lee: Who I gather is here today.

Pinder: Yes. I think there were 2 others and that was it and that was the headquarters.

[0:14:20] Lee: This was 1959, wasn't it?

Pinder: Yes, yes.

[0:14:24] Lee: So you had an interview?

Pinder: Yes.

[0:14:26] Lee: How was it?

Pinder: Oh, no problem. I just went in and they said 'Can you do this, can you do that? Would you mind cooking for the other chaps when you're down there?'. I said 'Well, I'm a bit limited but if they'll put up with it, I'll put up with theirs'. That was virtually it and then we went on board the ship.

[0:14:49] Lee: And the radio experience had been gathered in the RAF?

Pinder: Yes.

[0:14:54] Lee: Was it sufficient, your experience?

Pinder: Oh yes, yeah. Yeah, because we used to communicate all over the world in those days, Christmas Islands, well you name it. Anywhere, yes, it was the ideal thing really.

[0:15:21] Lee: So you caught the *Shackleton*?

Pinder: Caught the *Shackleton*, Captain Blackburn and his young wife which was a bit amusing. We read about her in the *Southampton Gazette*. One of the lads bought this and it said 'Captain Blackburn and his young bride...'. She wasn't exactly young. He being a naval chap had us holy stoning decks and cleaning brasses and keeping us entertained all the way down. Then we went down to the Falklands and of course that's where the office was. I had my RAF uniform which you had to keep for reserve. We stopped off ...I can't think of the islands.

[0:16:24] Lee: The Azores?

Pinder: No.

[0:16:26] Lee: Cape Verde, Tristan da Cunha?

Pinder: Wait a minute, I shall think of it.

[0:16:33] Lee: Don't worry.

Pinder: Anyway this bumboat used to come up and flogged all sorts of things, so I sold my uniform for a bunch of bananas and a guitar [laughs].

[0:16:47] Lee: Your army uniform?

Pinder: My RAF uniform, yes, complete with stripes.

[0:16:54] Lee: So you clearly weren't planning to go back to the RAF.

Pinder: No, I wasn't going back.

[0:16:57] Lee: OK. You were at Signy for was it 2 seasons, '59 to '61?

Pinder: 3 seasons. Yes, 3 seasons. I never went anywhere else. I went into Signy in October, November '59 and I came out '62, was it? '61, '62 in April. That's the only place I ever went because I'd got interested in the wildlife and I did some work on the Cape Pigeons¹.

[0:17:32] Lee: Was that off your own bat, Ron, or was that something you had arranged beforehand?

¹ Cape Pigeon, Cape Petrel, Pintado. *Daption Capense*. Normally found in the Southern Ocean.

Pinder: No, no, no. It was off me own bat. What happened was in those days most of the scientists and biologists used to go under the guise of 'Met men'. Like Lance Tickell, he was basically a Met man, he did all his research under [that] guise. When I got there Pete Richards was in charge of the birding programme and I helped him. Then when he left I carried on. Then Fergus appeared, Fergus O'Gorman, he was one of the first. Well, Dick Laws was the first biologist, that's all he was employed for. That was years before, and Fergus I think must have been the next one and he wanted help with the bird banding and that's how I sort of ended up taking it over. Then I used to go and visit the nests and mark the birds and generally do observations on them. All I was doing really was preparing it for somebody else. Like you marked all the skuas' nests and you rang the adults so that anybody coming in wanting to work on them had got instant data.

[0:18:56] Lee: So had you got an interest in ornithology before you went south?

Pinder: No, not really, no.

[0:19:00] Lee: So it was just pure random, was it?

Pinder: Yes, yes. We used to tag the seals as well and then I sort of left it. It wasn't until I came back. Martin Holdgate, he came down in the summer, that's when the actual biological unit was set up. He came down and when I got back to England, he knobbled me and he said ' Look, you've done all this data, you might as well write it all up'. So I spent a couple of months at Queen Mary College in London writing it all up.

[0:19:41] Lee: How was that for a chap with few qualifications, academic qualifications?

Pinder: Well, it was quite good, actually. I did try and get a job with the National Trust. The problem then (was) they'd just started doing graduates only, so I dipped out. A chap called Harry Dolman, who was at Signy and Bird Island before me, he I think was one of the last non-graduates that they employed and then of course I got married. And when one gets married, one has to get a job and one has to work. So the rest of the time I've just been doing normal work.

[0:20:34] Lee: Such as?

Pinder: When I came back I worked with the Police for 2 years. That was very interesting but very poorly paid and I realised that I could survive on that and bring up a family. Then I applied for a job with what was then the Central Electricity Generating Board. They had a control centre

in the middle of London and I got a post there. The idea was that we'd have to move back to London but because it was 12-hour shifts, so you worked 3 days one week and four the next and we had a room that we could stay over, I discovered that there was no need to leave, to move to the city, which I didn't want to do anyway. I preferred to live in the country anyway, so I stayed put and there I stayed for 22 years.

[0:21:37] Lee: Let's focus on your time in the Antarctic if we may. You mentioned you went to Signy as a Radio Operator in '59. Signy was a bit overwhelmed with people I hear, wasn't it, because of complications elsewhere?

Pinder: Yes, when we got there I think there was 5 of us due for the winter and then when the last ship came in they'd been down to the base on the Danco Coast and they couldn't get in. So we had an extra 4 people and the dogs. When I arrived at Signy there was just 2 dogs. They were more or less pets, although they were kept chained up. They were pets and they got taken for walks and things. I think we ended up with 18, 20 dogs. So we had 2 sledging teams which was a bit of an eye-opener. They had to be looked after. It was alright but it was just..., there was always things to do.

[0:22:43] Lee: Where did you all sleep?

Pinder: Oh, there was enough room in the bunks, bunk beds. It used to get down to minus six in the bedroom.

] Lee: Apart from doing your radio work, communication, sending signals back to Stanley, I guess you were sending all the Met Office signals.

Pinder: Yes, Port Stanley and the personal signals once a month. 200 words a month to Port Stanley.

[0:23:11] Lee: Were you also in touch with ships at all?

Pinder: Yes, we used to be in touch with the ships when they came down. We had what was called the *Goon Show*, which was a 7 o'clock to 8 o'clock at night.

[0:23:27] Lee: That was voice rather than morse?

Pinder: Yes, that was mainly voice. Also we used to talk to the other bases in the evenings. We did a bit of ham radio as well. I didn't get too involved in that because I felt it was a bit anti-social because when you were on the radio in the radio cabin you could hear the crackling in

the lounge and anyone trying to listen to Port Stanley had to So I didn't bother too much with that. Although I did have regular contact with a chap in Wales who used to pass messages to parents and people like that.

[0:24:19] Lee: Tell me how things changed over these 3 years you were at Signy because at that time British Antarctic Survey was gradually trying to improve it's facilities, wasn't it?

Pinder: Oh yes, yes. The first year was normal and we used to work, it was very much traditional. You had the cook-of-the-week who was expected to provide 3 meals a day and cookies in the afternoon. I must admit it was a bit of a chore.

[0:24:54] Lee: You changed that, didn't you ?

Pinder: Yes. That was the second year when 'Wink' came down.

[0:24:59] Lee: 'Wink' Mander?

Pinder: 'Wink' Mander and Derek Clarke. They'd already been through all that and said 'We didn't like it, do you?' We said 'No', so then we did day about. And we carried that on and then then the big change came my last summer when Martin Holdgate came in with Barry Heywood, Pete Tilbrook and they were starting the proper biological programme. Prior to that the engines only went on really for the 'skeds' in the mornings and evenings but they needed 24 hour power which upset the diesel mech a bit [laughs]. It was quite strange actually. We used to wind Martin up occasionally.

[0:25:59] Lee: How do you mean?

Pinder: We used to say 'Bloody scientists. Too many chiefs, not enough bloody Indians. How are you going to get everything done?'

[0:26:08] Lee: But did the whole feel of the base change when the scientists started to arrive?

Pinder: Not really, no. No, because we all got on together. I suppose there was a feeling that things weren't going to be the same ever again. Basically you just fitted in and did what you had to do. I was fairly fortunate because when he came in we had a new Radio Operator in, Pete Hobbs. He was a big ham radio man and dead keen on radio and I thought, well, I'd have to day and day about or something like that and I'd have to fit the birds and things in when I could. But he was quite happy to do the whole lot. In fact he moved his bed into the radio shack. So I just got on with the bird programmes and things like that.

[0:27:20] Lee: So that occupied an increasing amount of your time?

Pinder: Yes.

[0:27:22] Lee: So what were you discovering about the Cape Pigeons that either you didn't know or wasn't widely known previously?

Pinder: We found out that they used to migrate to New Zealand and the New Zealand ones used to come back to us and we started getting age old birds. We found out the age that they started to breed. The incubation period and things like that they knew about but they didn't know where they went to during the winter. We started finding out things like that. But my main idea was to prepare the ground for somebody else more qualified than I was to do all the hard work.

[0:28:12] Lee: Do you know if anybody ever did that?

Pinder: No, because when I produced the paper, that told them more or less what they wanted, so they could specialise. They would take the feeding habits and go round with buckets and collect the feed and digest that.

[0:28:29] Lee: So are they an interesting species?

Pinder: No they're fairly straightforward actually, no. They're not very complicated like the albatrosses and the Giant Petrels who go much further afield.

[0:28:45] Lee: Were you able to use the dog teams at all? Was there much sledging around Signy?

Pinder: Yes, we had good years and bad years' sea ice. We sent them all over to Coronation Island the first winter. The second winter we sent them over to Coronation Island and the sea ice conveniently went out.

[0:29:12] Lee: This is a ...

Pinder: This was when Roger Filer, Paddy White and Bernard Harrison went over and 'Wink', Derek Clarke and I were left on base. They were over the other side and they went up to the highest point that they could get and we went to ours and we made signals to one another and we tried semaphore but that wasn't getting anywhere. They could hear us at one stage. The radio, it was a hand cranked thing, broke down and we didn't really have any contact. We decided that

we'd got to get a boat over to get them and the dogs back. It required 2 people to go in the boats, so 'Wink' said ' Well, I'm bugged if I'm letting you and Clarkie go over there and I'm stuck here if the weather's bad. So we had to wait until it was a really calm day and we took 2 boats over, a 12 foot clinker and the fibreglass (boat). We'd rigged it all out with ropes and chains and what have you and we went over and we brought the dogs back. Then we went back over and got the lads back and they had to leave all the sledges and everything there. There was enough sledging for anybody who wanted to go sledging to satisfy them, really.

[0:30:53] Lee: You kind of skipped over that stranded party at Coronation Island. Was there more to it than what you said? Were there moments when you were worried about them or yourselves?

Pinder: Not really because we could see them. Through binoculars we could see that they were there but we were a bit worried about as to when we were going to get them back. I don't think we told SECFIDS that they were there. They had just gone over and they would come back when they were ready. I think we kept that pretty quiet until after they got back. Then we had to send a signal and say ' Look, we got them back but can the *Shackleton* go and pick all their gear up?'

[0:31:38] Lee: Oh right, so you had to leave the dogs behind?

Pinder: No, no, we brought the dogs back with us.

[0:31:42] Lee: In the 12 foot dinghy?

Pinder: In the dinghies, yes. That was fun.

[0:31:46] Lee: One dinghy?

Pinder: No, we had a 12 foot clinker boat and a fibreglass dinghy.

[0:31:51] Lee: Didn't the dogs try get out?

Pinder: Well, they couldn't because we chained them down. I've got some photographs of them. They seemed to enjoy it actually. All we were interested in was getting back as quick as possible.

[0:32:07] Lee: There was another incident involving Coronation Island which was a bit scarier, I believe.

Pinder: What, the ice.... ?

[0:32:15] Lee: When you were with Ken Kenyon.

Pinder: Oh, God yes. We were collecting eggs. We used to collect the penguins eggs for the base for the whole year and we used to bring them back and put them down in flour. The ideal time was when most of the penguins had got 2 eggs. They got 1 and some had got 2. But they always laid 2 eggs but you didn't want to get 2 eggs and take the lot away, so it was best to take the 1 because they always laid another one. Anyway we went over to Coronation Island, going along with the dogs and there's a big tide crack and suddenly these penguins popped up and the dogs saw them and they went straight for it. We thought we would get across but we didn't and we come to a grinding halt. Ken had jumped off and I'm at the back of the sledge, the dogs are pulling but they can't get me out because I'm like that. So, in the end, Ken said 'Well, you'll have to let 'em go'. So I let them go and of course I'm floundering around in the water and every time I got out, the ice sort of fell away. But he got a big thumper, a big long rope. He laid on the ice and eventually he pulled me out. By this time, the dogs had disappeared and they were half-way back to base. We did catch up with them about a mile back to base.

[0:33:52] Lee: Were they still chained together, in their trace?

Pinder: Yeah, they were all on the trace. They were absolutely shattered by this time.

[0:34:06] Lee: So how did that resolve itself? How did you get the sledge back? Did you have to man-haul it back?

Pinder: The sledge? No the dogs had got the sledge.

[0:34:13] Lee: So they were OK [laughs]..

Pinder: Yeah, they'd got the sledge. We had to walk back, didn't we. Then when we got the sledge we were alright.

[0:34:20] Lee: So you're walking back to base soaking wet.

Pinder: Yes. Fortunately it was a calm, windless sunny day and it wasn't too cold either.

[0:34:33] Lee: Was there a lesson to be learned from that or was that just one of those things?

Pinder: Just one of those things. Of course, health and safety in those days was non-existent.

[0:34:46] Lee: Well, there was common sense, I guess, wasn't there?

Pinder: Yes, oh yes. But you went out in the boat on your own. Of course you wouldn't be allowed to now at all.

[0:35:04] Lee: You also used the dinghies to collect bergy bits for melt for water.

Pinder: Oh yes, that's right, yes.

[0:35:09] Lee: Tell me about that.

Pinder: Well, the bergy bits used to come in and you used to chop them, chop chunks off and tie them up and tow them in. We were going across to Billy Rocks which was just in the bay and there's quite a reasonable size little berg there and a nice chunky bit. So I got the axe and I'm chunking through it and when I got through, the bergy bit fell in the water and there was a big upheaval and suddenly I shot up in the air in the boat and landed flat on the rock, in the boat still. The berg (had) turned over. I suppose it wasn't that big, probably as high as the top of that cupboard, not even to the ceiling. Most of it of course was under the water, but it turned and the impact washed straight up and I was dead lucky that it landed so that I was still upright.

[0:36:12] Lee: So the fact you hacked a bit off destabilised it.

Pinder: Destabilised it, yeah.

[0:36:18] Lee: One of your *Goon Show* was overheard, wasn't it? Wasn't it overheard in the Falklands?

Pinder: Yeah, we were on to one of the bases. I think it was a New Year's, not a New Year's, a midsummer's night. Paddy White and company and we were all telling jokes and singing and of course as the booze went down they got more raucous and more loud. We weren't worried because nobody heard it anyway. Until the next day we got a signal from (I can't remember) which island, which sheep station it was in the Falklands and it said 'Enjoyed your programme very much last night. Can we tune in for another one tonight?'. Which was a bit embarrassing actually.

[0:37:10] Lee: Modified your behaviour did it?

Pinder: Yes [laughs].

[0:37:13] Lee: I mean the *Goon Show* was quite an institution, wasn't it, particularly in the early years?

Pinder: Oh yes.

[0:37:18] Lee: How did it work?

Pinder: Somebody just called up and...

[0:37:23] Lee: Were all the stations on all together, were they?

Pinder: Yes. You had your Met sked I think it was 8 o'clock at night and then after it you tuned and everybody chatted to everybody else. The ships generally used to jin in when they were down. it was a bit of a free-for-all really.

[0:37:51] Lee: Was it a kind of concert party ?

Pinder: No, it wasn't a *Goon Show* as much, it was just chit chat.

[0:37:59] Lee: Garden fence gossip.

Pinder: Yes. How old so-and-so getting on, and what have you and that type of thing. You learned various things that you probably wouldn't have done by listening to their normal radio.

[0:38:18] Lee: So, those who wanted to would gather round the radio in the evenings?

Pinder: Yes.

[0:38:22] Lee: Were you learning about movements of ships as well, more important stuff? Was it all just nonsense really?

Pinder: It was all more or less nonsense. Because the ships you knew where they were going. That was all official, you'd get their movements anyway.

[0:38:41] Lee: Tell me a bit more about 'Wink' Mander, because there were 2 or 3 incidents that he was involved with, weren't there?

Pinder: 'Wink' ? Oh God, yeah.

[0:38:53] Lee: I'm thinking of toilets.

Pinder: Ah, toilets, yes. Well, Bolton and Poole [phonetic] built the toilets at the end of the hut, next to the radio shack and opposite the kitchen. We used to use 14 pound flour tins, empty tins. They built a 2-holer, so you put a tin there and a tin there. Once that one was full, you'd take it... the idea of 2 holes was once one was full, you blocked it off and waited till it got emptied and, if not, you used the one next to it. Anyway, on the *Goon Show* one night, the lads came through and they said ' We got this flippin' bloke on. He's coming down ??? [inaudible] but he knew everything and what he wasn't going to do and he was generally quite loud and what have you'. Anyway when he came ashore he was in our lounge. It's a bit like you're in a house, you're in your home and suddenly you're invaded by all these people. And he's letting forth. He disappears out to the toilet. I think we had seal meat and dried onions, so 'Wink' goes in, opens the toilet, the bloke goes 'Aaahh'. So 'Wink' sits down, farts and starts chatting away to him.

[0:40:22] Lee: On the 2-holer.

Pinder: On the 2-holer. Then 'Wink' comes out and they said when he came back into the lounge, they'd never seen anybody quite so deflated. I think it served him well actually because I think he's alright after. It really taught him a lesson.

[0:40:40] Lee: What about the supply of alcohol, was 'Wink' also involved in a deal with alcohol?

Pinder: When we went down with Captain Blackburn, when I came off the ship they said you could get extra booze if you want. It wasn't Gerry Cutland, he wasn't on the *Shackleton* but when I approached the steward there he says 'Oh, Captain Blackburn says we're not to give you very much'. So I got a bottle of rum and a bottle of gin. No, a bottle of rum and a bottle of whisky and somebody else got 2 bottles and that was it. Anyway, 'Wink' comes down and he says 'What's the score with the booze?'. I was the Minister of Food and I said 'There's loads upstairs, rum, good Lord, enough to sink a battleship'.

He said ' Well, that's alright but we got a long way to go. We better get some more stuff in', and he says 'What do you want? I know Gerry Cutland on the *Biscoe*. There's no problem'. He said 'What do you want?'.

I thought 'Well, I've only got a bottle of gin and a bottle of rum, I'll have one of each. One of each'.

He says 'That's fine'. So we all piled on board, had a few beers and what have you. He come out and said 'Right, c'mon then'. We get up the top of the gangway and it's absolutely chock a block with cases. A case of gin, a case of whisky, a case of rum. So we piled it all on board and

brought it ashore. It sounded a lot but in actual fact all it was that if you wanted to drink, you could have a drink.

[0:42:25] Lee: Where did he get it from, was it the ship swamped with booze?

Pinder: What? Gerry Cutland?

[0:42:30] Lee: Yeah.

Pinder: Well, yeah, because he used to sell it on the way down, you see, in the mess and to the crew. The more he could sell the more money he made presumably so he was quite happy to sell it.

[0:42:48] Lee: There's also a story about McEwan's Ale..

Pinder: Oh, McEwan's, yes. We decided to send back to Port Stanley for the McEwan's Ale and we expected small tins or bottles and they didn't . They came in a big case. Captain Johnson it was.

[0:43:09] Lee: Bill Johnson.

Pinder: Bill Johnson, yeah. He came on the radio and said that he was coming in, he didn't have time to offload everything that we needed, but he would send a scow ashore with the essentials. Of course this scow comes ashore loaded with these bloody boxes of McEwan's. They were litre bottles all packed in straw and what have you.

[0:43:40] Lee: So there's no shortage of alcohol on Signy. Yet at that time weren't FIDS a bit careful about how much you drinking you did?

Pinder: Oh yes, yes, yes. I think after that session they really clamped down on it.

[0:43:57] Lee: You all got riotously drunk, did you?

Pinder: Well, no (but) if you wanted to you could have done.

[0:44:03] Lee: No, at that point when all this booze suddenly arrived.

Pinder: No, no it was all sort of regulated.

[0:44:09] Lee: Regulated. Was that your job?

Pinder: Well no we shared it out between us really. We just made sure it was available if anybody wanted it.

[0:44:18] Lee: You said you were Minister of Food. What did you mean by that?

Pinder: Oh, Minister of Food, you were in charge of all the stores and the food and you allocated it to the cook. It was all rationed out but if you went by the rations and you were responsible for ordering next year's as well. If you went by the rations, they were quite adequate and previous Ministers of Food, if you got something they didn't particularly like, they still ordered the maximum amount, so you had loads of food. You kept 6 months supply as well in case anything went wrong. It worked very well.

[0:45:14] Lee: Were there problems in knowing what food was where? Presumably you had to stash it all away and have an inventory.

Pinder: Oh yes, we had an inventory and we knew which had got to be used first and which hadn't and the 6-month's supply was kept in the hut down at Berntsen Point and every year we'd swap it over and bring it in. We had some porridge oats I think which went down in 1937 with the Grahamland Expedition.

[0:45:56] Lee: They were OK, were they?

Pinder: Perfectly OK, yeah. And then we used to eat seal meat as well because we had to kill seals for the dogs, so we had seal liver and seal meat.

[0:46:11] Lee: Tell me about these Adelie penguins and Edinburgh Zoo. What's the story here?

Pinder: Ah. We had a message from SECFIDS saying, requesting that we collect a dozen Adelie penguins and we brought them back to base and kept them for the *Shackleton* or the *Biscoe* to come and pick them up and eventually they would end up at Edinburgh Zoo. This was the first summer, Pete Richards was the Base Leader, he just sent back 'Gone Fishing'. We then got a screed back from SECFIDS saying that your relationship with the Edinburgh Zoo was excellent and very good and we were obliged to try this, that and the other.

[0:47:04] Lee: This is Tony Green, was it?

Pinder: Yeah. It rambled on a bit to the end. So then Pete sent back ' I refer you to my Bird Island Ornithological Report, 1958, page so-and-so, paragraph so-and-so which states...'. When we got this message it was in beginning of March and by this time all the penguins, all the Adelies had gone. '...refer you to that'. So then we got back, not an apologetic one but [saying] 'Well, perhaps you could get some Chinstrap ones instead'. Which is what we did. I spent hours catching *notothenia*², cutting it into strips, feeding these bloody penguins. I think some of them did get back to Edinburgh Zoo.

[0:47:56] Lee: But not all?

Pinder: Not all, no.

[0:47:58] Lee: So did you box them up in some way for the boat, for the ship?

Pinder: We built cages for them for the ship but what they did with them when they got back to the UK, I don't know. I assume that they must have had a supply of fish and that to keep them.

[0:48:20] Lee: They would have had to have gone through the Tropics, wouldn't they?

Pinder: Yes, yes. But some of them did make it back.

[0:48:27] Lee: There's a story about a husky pup. Bill Mitchell.

Pinder: Ah, this is on to the toilet things.

[0:48:33] Lee: Oh is it? I didn't know that.

Pinder: Yes. 'Wink', once that had gone, decided that... It was adjacent to the hut, this toilet, so we built a beach bog. There was always stuff in the way it was planned, there was loads of wood about. So we built this beach bog about 30 or 40 yards and it had got a flag on it. The idea was you went down and when you went in, you lowered the flag. When you finished and came back you highered the flag. But it didn't work.

[0:49:10] Lee: Why not?

Pinder: I don't know because you'd get to the back door, there'd be a howling gale and you'd look, and the flag would be down and you'd think 'Oh, God'. Then you'd go round and have a

² A genus of cod icefishes native to the Southern Ocean and other waters around Antarctica.

count-up. Everybody was back. So then we used to use the beach and you used to find tide cracks and places down there and it was on one of these occasions I'd been down and we had husky pups running round and they used to chase you everywhere. They weren't averse, like a lot of dogs, to eating what was left and of course I'd been down, the pups had been down, been in, came back and as I came round the corner, it was a lovely sunny day and the slopes at the back there, the cook of the day which was Bill on the window, watching. Round the corner races these pups and they're licking his face. 'Bill, you don't really want to know where they...'. [laughs].

[0:50:20] Lee: We've been looking at the funny side of working and living at Signy at that time, but there was also the sad case of Roger Filer. Were you around at that time?

Pinder: Yeah..... phew.

[0:50:36] Lee: You don't have to talk if you don't want to.

Pinder: Yeah, I will do. It's just that I'd promised I wouldn't get..... Yes. It was very sad.

[0:50:48] Lee: What's your memory of that episode?

Pinder: Quite a lot. 'Wink', Bernard Harrison and Roger were on base and we'd built a refuge hut over the other side of the island so that when you went over to..., instead of going over every day to band the giant petrels or work on any of the birds, you'd got somewhere you could go. It had a wind genny, a radio and a place you could stay. Derek and I were over there banding the 'GP's' or counting the 'GP's' and 'Wink' was one of these blokes who could do everything, he could do the radio as well. So he used to do the radio and we had a sked with him every night and he called up and he said 'Is Roger with you?'

'No'.

'Oh'.

And Roger had left early in the morning to go to Gourlay to do some work on some sheathbills so Derek and I thought ' Well, this is a bit worrying'. We went out and we went up, bearing in mind it's dark, although it was a moonlit night. We went up and we called and hollered and you could hear for miles, over the icecap. Nothing. So we came back down and we decided that the best thing to do was to get back to base, but it was dark. So we went back over the little icecap and into Shallow Bay where we left the boat and all got into base by which time it's 12, 1 o'clock in the morning and we decided also that there was nothing could be done until daylight. As you can imagine, we had a pretty restless night and then [sighs] we went out to Gourlay and we found him. He was flat down on a rock. He was obviously, you know, dead. So, they lowered me down on a rope and we managed to get him back up to the top.

[0:53:15] Lee: Did you volunteer to go down on the rope?

Pinder: I don't know who.... It was just...

[0:53:20] Lee: Alright. But you brought him back.

Pinder: one of these things. But we got him back up to the top and the sea was very rough, so we knew there was no way we could get a boat round because it was a particularly rough area to get into. We then went back to base and we got sailcloth and what have you and we wrapped him in that and built a cairn over him and 'Wink' knocked up a cross and that was it. We asked for one of the boats to come but they weren't in the area and it would have been too ... well, it just wasn't feasible. So it wasn't until the next year, the *Shackleton*, I think it was the *Shackleton*, came in and the padre came in and they actually went down and consecrated the grave and he's still there in the same place. But that was a bit traumatic, as you can imagine. There's 5 of you then suddenly there's 4.

[0:54:21] Lee: And he'd just fallen, had he?

Pinder: He'd just fallen.

[0:54:25] Lee: Collecting eggs or something, was he? Ringing birds?

Pinder: Yeah, he was banding birds. These sheathbills lived in holes anywhere and everywhere. There's a flat ridge and the sheathbill was at the end and I think he was probably trying to hook it out. Roger was one of those who had a camera on this shoulder and a pair of binoculars there and he probably came out and startled and slipped and that was it. I suppose that was probably a good thing, reminder that he should have gone in twos. There again you see, it wasn't always feasible for 2 people to spend the time to do this.

[0:55:18] Lee: But generally speaking did you change the way you worked into having pairs only?

Pinder: No, we didn't really. I think we were a lot more cautious. Any nest that was out of reach that you had to climb up (to), we just didn't bother about. It was just noted and that's it. Anything on the edge of the cliff or round the corner, where you had to scramble round, you just didn't bother about.

[0:55:56] Lee: Did you try to meet Roger's family when you got home?

Pinder: Yes, I went down to Aberavon and met his Mum and Dad and Anne. Of course, Derek had come home the year before me, so he'd already been down and then of course he married Anne.

[0:56:23] Lee: Derek?

Pinder: Clarke. Yes, he married Anne. Yes, (it was) very sad for the parents. Very typical, they'd worked hard all their lives and got the children through to university.

[0:56:37] Lee: Did you think that they were grateful that you'd made the effort to go and see them?

Pinder: Oh yes, yes, oh yes they were. We kept in touch. In fact we kept in touch really until they passed away. Anne took it very badly. Somebody said it's only since they had this monument that's she's come to terms but she would never discuss and we never discussed it with her either. She knew that we knew the score anyway.

[0:57:13] Lee: I've got a couple of little stories to ask you to wind up on, if I may Ron. One is another Derek, Derek Gipps, that involves trousers.

Pinder: Oh yes, that's right. Well, this is only hearsay. Apparently they were in Stanley and they used to dish out the uniforms in Stanley. Sometimes they were a bit like the army things, they were a bit big and this chap was muttering on and on about these bloody trousers were too long and how was he going to get them. In the end, Derek Gipps said 'Give them to me'. Got 'em out, put 'em on the deck, laid them out. Went and got the fire axe and went 'phhsttt'. 'There you are, sir' [laughs].

[0:58:01] Lee: You were there when the - we're used to tourist ships in the Antarctic but you saw 1 or 2 of the the first ones, didn't you?

Pinder: No, we didn't see any. No, we didn't see any at all. What happened was when you are on the radio, you can tell the transmitters, the sound of a transmitter yho knew before ... it had only just got to send its callsign and you knew 'Ah, that Deception'. This particular night this bloody thing came up and I thought 'Who the hell's that?'

Anyway, it was the Radio Op from Deception. In the morning he'd got a long screed from SECFIDS in code, which of course naturally we took down and decoded. He was actually on board the tourist ship having great fun, all of them.

[0:59:05] Lee: Baffling people?

Pinder: Well, you know, just enjoying himself. I don't think they left anybody on base. When we deciphered this bloody thing it said ' Under no circumstances, repeat no circumstances, are you to go near or fraternise with any members of the tourist ship visiting your area'. Too late, they were already onboard . And the one at Admiralty Bay, the lads were out with the binoculars ' There's a ship coming'. So they all went in, they all changed into their best gear, and they're all standing where the old jetty was waiting and it came in, round, waved and went out again.

[0:59:53] Lee: Aaah.

Pinder: No, the only thing we got the whole time I was there was a whaling ship, a whaler which brought us a large chunk of whale meat, a few whales teeth and various other bits and bobs. I don't really know why they came in. I think it was just a flying visit. The year after the Russians came in. That's when the lady came down.

[1:00:29] Lee: The lady?

Pinder: Yes, the Russian. Svetlana I think her name was. Pete Tilbrook, have you spoken to Pete? He must have told you about that because I'm sure Pete was there when she was there.

[1:00:42] Lee: Tell me your story to finish with.

Pinder: What?

[1:00:45] Lee: Tell me what you saw.

Pinder: What, ??? [inaudible].

[1:00:48] Lee: With Svetlana.

Pinder: No, I didn't see her, I wasn't there. No, she came afterwards, no. We had nobody, we only had this bloody whaling ship. They were lucky, they got all the...

[1:00:59] Lee: Attractive Russian lot .

Pinder: Oh yes, yes.

[1:01:02] Lee: Looking back over your life, Ron, how does the Antarctic rate?

Pinder: It was an experience I enjoyed and I wouldn't have missed it in the world and I just think how fortunate. Pay 8 thousand pounds to go down there, I wouldn't want to go down on a ship like that, it would....

] Lee: Tourist ship.

Pinder: Not a tourist ship, no. Everything's changed so much, even... Because I was on Bird Island with Lance Tickell for 18 months and it's changed out of all...

[1:01:40]] Lee: Tell me a bit about Bird Island, because not many people talk about Bird Island.

Pinder: Well, there again, 'Wink' Mander was involved. I'd spoken to Lance. Lance was working on the Wandering Albatross. He wanted to work on the Giant Petrels. He'd tried to get to talk the British Antarctic Survey, as it was then, no they were still Falkland Island Dependencies, to into setting a base up. They weren't really that interested. So he then ... Bill Sladen, who'd been down in Hope Bay years ago, was a Professor at Maryland University. So Lance went over and Bill managed to get USAR, United States Antarctic Research, people to fund Lance to go down to work on Bird Island. But it was all done through BAS because it had to be sorted out, they had to get permission from BAS. Lance wanted somebody who could operate the radio, didn't mind doing a bit of concreting and other sorts of things and bird work as well. Anyway, he came back, he went with 'Wink' and he tried to talk 'Wink' (into it). Well, 'Wink' wasn't interested in birds anyway and it didn't fit into his next move, so he suggested I went. I got this note from Lance out of the blue to go to meet at the Chandlers' [phonetic] Club off Trafalgar Square for a bit of a do. So I went, had a bit of a do and left. Oh, that's right, on the way out he said 'Oh, by the way, I'm getting married at Sutton Church tomorrow morning, why don't you come?'

[1:03:47] So of course the next morning I woke up and I thought 'I don't even know him that well., you can't just sort of turn up'. About 3 days later I got a card from him saying 'Sorry you didn't make it to the wedding but I meant to have a word with you on Friday night about going to Bird Island' as a Radio Op. So I contacted him, we started off and we set the whole thing up in London. We were in the same office as Bunny Fuchs who used to come 'Bloody foreigners coming in here,' he used to mutter and mumble but it was all in good spirit. Sp we went down, more or less the same as FIDS. We used Andrews Lusks, the food and the ships and everything was just like FIDS. We arrived on Bird Island with I think it was 64 tons of equipment and 3 of us. Part of the deal that Lance had (was that) he would have 1 American. A young lad out of Honolulu University, a bloke called Harry Clagg, was an entomologist. He came down and got a bit of a shock to the system. He was 19, 20 and we were almost in our bloody 30's at this stage. Anyway, he fitted in and we went down, we got ashore, there was a little 8 x 4 garden shed,

'Bonners' Bothy'. I slept in there and Harry and Lance slept in the tent and we got all the stuff with the help of a bloke called Bill Vaughan, was a sealing inspector then at Grytviken, he came in and we put up the main hut, 3 other huts, and wired them all up. It was just like a FIDS base. It was hard graft, I can tell you. Hard graft but it was enjoyable.

[1:06:02] Then Lance worked on his albatrosses, the Wanderers, and I ran the Grey Heads and the Blackbrows. I used to go to their rookeries every day. It doesn't sound very high, but about 3 or 4 hundred feet every day up the hill, twice a day. They went all over the place. You'd just be coming home, you'd been down probably been banding birds, absolutely knackered, and you'd see this bird come in and it'd drop in and 'Oh God, not another bloody Aussie'. [laughs]. You'd chase after it and catch it and take the numbers and what have you. Yes, that was very interesting, I really enjoyed that.

[1:06:58] Lee: That was your last time in the Antarctic?

Pinder: That was my last time.

[1:07:01] Lee: You came home. So you'd actually made 2 journeys, one to go to Signy and then one back again.

Pinder: One back again, yes. I met my wife in between, so she was waiting. There's another little story there. When Lance and I came back we came to Port Stanley then we went to Montevideo and then we flew back. We're flying into London and in we go, Lance goes 'Go through'. 'Oh yes'. In this room we go, 'Read this'.

[1:07:44] Lee: This is Customs, is it?

Pinder: No. I think it was MI5. It said 'You are requested to go to this office in Whitehall tomorrow morning at 11 o'clock. Do not, repeat, do not mention this to anybody'. Rips it up. That's it. Now I've got my fiancée outside and, oh dear, I had quite a performance trying to convince her that it was all innocent and when I got there as soon as I went in, I knew. It was all about Poland.

[1:08:31] Lee: Oh right.

Pinder: Now that was 6 years later. They'd obviously kept tabs on me because they knew exactly when I was coming back in and they was obviously sitting there waiting for me to come back in. They wanted information about the goings-on in the Embassy which was quite a lot. Working in an Embassy is quite intriguing actually because you never know who's who.

[1:09:00] Lee: This was 6 years after you left the Embassy in Poland.

Pinder: Yes, and I was out of the RAF anyway.

[1:09:07] Lee: I mean I can't ask you what you told them but were you able to help them?

Pinder: In some respects, yes, I suppose I was, yes, but most of it was just confirming what they already knew.

[1:09:20] Lee: Your wife must have married you because you were a man of mystery.

Pinder: Yes [laughs] , it was very difficult to explain to her exactly why I had to go to London and why I couldn't tell her. When I got back I said 'Look, this is the score. It was something to do with when I was in Poland and the Foreign Office wanted some confirmation'. Oh dear.

[1:09:49] Lee: Ron, you've left your wife in the car. We've been keeping her.

Pinder: Yeah, I'm hoping that ...

[1:09:53] Lee: ..she's still there.

Pinder: I saw Barry Heywood and Joe down in the hall. I told her where they were, so they might have picked her up.

[1:10:00] Lee: It's been a real pleasure, Ron, we'll leave it at that. Thank you so much for your time. Thank you.

ENDS.

Some highlights:

[0:07:45] Sent to Embassy in Warsaw to work as 'listening spy'.

[0:16:33] RAF uniform sold for some bananas and a guitar in mid-Atlantic.

[0:32:15] Walking back to base without dogs or sledge after soaking from fall into tide-crack.

[0:35:09] Near thing as destabilised berg sends boat flying and lands upright on flat rock.

[0:38:53] Newcomer deflated in toilet sharing incident.

[0:42:48] McEwan's Ale supplies arrive ashore from *Shackleton* as essential equipment.

[0:46:11] Delivery of penguins to Edinburgh Zoo.

[0:50:36] Tragedy of Roger Filer's death in fall while bird banding.

[0:59:03] Whaler supplies base with whale meat and teeth.

[1:01:40] US-funded expedition to Bird Island with Lance Tickell.