

KEN LAX

Edited transcript of a recording of Ken interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on 23rd September 2012. BAS Archives AD6/24/1/190. Transcribed by Andy Smith, 4th June 2013.

[Part 1 0:00:00] Lee: Ken Lax, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 23rd of September 2012. Ken Lax, Part One.

Lax: Ken Lax. I wintered at Halley Bay. I was born on September 24th 1946. I left the UK in 1973 and I wintered at Halley in '74/ '75. I went back again and wintered in '77.

[Part 1 0:00:30] Lee: So you are going to be 66 tomorrow?

Lax: Yep.

[Part 1 0:00:33] Lee: And not retired yet?

Lax: No, no still going strong.

[Part 1 0:00:36] Lee: Tell me a bit about your background. What was your father?

Lax: My father was an army officer, so as children we travelled round the world with him. I was born in Aldershot, which is a military town, and soon after that we moved to Berkshire. Then I spent my early years in Kingston-on-Thames in Surrey, and a short while in Stockton-on-Tees when my father was posted there. Then in 1952 we went to Libya and we lived in Libya from the end of '52 to '56, then came home from Libya. We were stationed in ... I can't remember where. We came back to the UK and then we went to Germany. Then I went to prep school and public school in England and my father went on to serve in Kenya and Christmas Island, which were unaccompanied postings. So we stayed at home in the UK with relatives either in Surrey or in Liverpool, and of course I was at boarding school then so I used to just go home once a year to see the family.

[Part 1 0:01:59] Lax: Then after that I went to college – it was called a CAT in those days – College of Advanced Technology, somewhere between a tech college and a university, and I studied marine radio, radar, electronics, sonar: that kind of stuff. I was pretty hard up. My parents were overseas and I was pretty skint, so as soon as I got my qualifications I went to sea. I couldn't go deep sea, which was what I wanted to do, because the Suez Canal was shut and the international merchant shipping was closed down. I was at college in Hull and I managed to get on a trawler sailing out of Grimsby. I had never been to sea before and I got myself to Grimsby and jumped on this ship and sailed off to Iceland, which was a sort of 'baptism by fire' because as well as being terribly seasick until we got to the fishing grounds, and then seasick on the way back, I had to learn how to operate all the things I had learned about without the benefit of any apprenticeship or training.

[Part 1 0:03:11] Lee: What was it that drew you to going to sea?

Lax: I don't really know. It may well have been because my favourite uncle had been in the sea during the war. That may have been it. But I just wanted a sense of adventure and I can remember thinking that I might join the army or the air force or the Royal Navy, because obviously coming from a military background it didn't seem a huge step for me to do that. And when I searched around, I realised that I could be a radio officer in the merchant navy, but I would have to join the Royal Navy as a non-commissioned officer or something of that equivalent. So I thought I may as well take the easy route and go straight in and that's what I did. But as there were no merchant ships available, I went on the trawlers and I did that for a few years, almost all out of Grimsby, on what we called the 'freshers' as opposed to the 'freezers'. We went to Greenland, Iceland, Bear Island, Novaya Zemlya – those kind of places; then after a while I went on a freezer trawler. The freshers used to stay away about three weeks and come back for three days and go away for three weeks, and the freezer used to go away for months on end. I went on that and went to Newfoundland and Greenland. I did that for just one trip which probably turned out to be about 3 or 4 months I think.

[Part 1 0:04:48] Lax: Then when I came back I thought that I ought to spread my wings a bit. The Canal was then open, so I went what we call free-lance and I was given a job on a Greek tanker, a Liberian-registered Greek tanker, which I joined in Southampton, in a place called Fawley. I remember taking the train down to Southampton and getting on this tanker which was a very very nice ship with mid-ships accommodation for the radio officer, and of course after the trawlers it was huge. The trawlers I was on were: the very biggest was 1000 tons, and this tanker was 50,000 tons. So I had a huge radio room and a huge suite for my accommodation instead of a tiny shared bunkroom. I remember getting on board and thinking 'This will be interesting, to see where we go.' I had no idea where it was going and as we sailed I set up all the radios and got the message to say 'Go to Bahrain and wait for orders.' The Suez Canal was still not fully functional so we went via Cape Town which was quite a long haul. So we sailed all the way there and after about three days I realised that the only word I had in common with anybody was 'omelette'. It was the only thing that was the same in English and Greek that I had found. So I thought 'Right. I had better learn some Greek.'

[Part 1 0:06:22] Lax: So I went back to my schooldays, because when I was at prep school, when we first arrived, they gave us a little blank notebook, a bit less than A5 size. I remember saying 'What's this?' He said 'Oh, it's your vocab book.' I looked at it and I said 'Well there's nothing in it!' He said 'No, you have to write on the left hand side 5 words in Latin and on the right hand side 5 words in French. You can choose whichever words you like, but you have to learn those, and at any time of the day or night, during prep or during the normal day, any teacher can come and take your vocab book and quiz you on any of the words. So you have to learn them. So every day I learned 5 words in Latin and 5 words in French. Of course you never remember them all, but after a month you have theoretically got 150 words. You might remember half of them so you have got 75, but the next month you are up to 300. You might remember half which is 150. So it's a jolly clever way of doing it because you pick your own words, words that interest you. So I thought 'They are mugs, these people. One two three four five six seven eight nine ten, dog, cat, horse, that sort of stuff.' But you start to struggle after a while; it really stretches you. So when I was on the Greek ship, I did exactly the same thing. I just did five words a

day. Well after about 6 months I was pretty well fluent in Greek, written and spoken, so life got a lot easier after that, and I stayed on that ship for about 2 years.

[Part 1 0:07:53] Lax: I didn't come home at all; I just ... We went all round the world: all round the Americas, a lot of time in the Far East which I enjoyed very much. Then eventually I left the ship because a school-friend of mine was getting married and he had sent me a telegram to say he was getting married, and I had always promised to be at his wedding. So I left the ship after two years which was rather sad in many ways but time goes on. I left that and I came back to the UK, went to his wedding, stayed a month or so and then I joined a German company and I worked on basically fairly old tankers. This particular company had a process of buying new ships and crewing them with different nationalities and when the ships were pretty well run down they would put the Germans on board because the Germans with their 'Deutsche Ordnung' would get all the machinery working again and so on and so forth.

[Part 1 0:09:00] Lax: I became part of that team; I went to do the radio side of it and again I was the only English person on board. They were either Germans or Philipinos. German officers and technicians and engineers, and Philipino crew, and I stayed with that firm for quite a long time. The first trip I joined a ship in Singapore. We went all round the Far East, got tied up a bit in the Vietnam War because we were running aviation turbine to the Americans in Vietnam, but we were fudging the bills of lading to say that we were going to Yokohama. So we would load up with jet fuel and then tiptoe into Vietnam at night, discharge to some American lighters and then carry on up to Yokohama, discharge a few cupfuls and fudge the documentation to make it look as though it had all been discharged. All terribly...

[Part 1 0:09:58] Lee: Terribly dangerous, I would have thought.

Lax: Terribly dangerous, really. We did once...

[Part 1 0:10:02] Lee: What would have happened if you had been caught?

Lax: Well we did once nearly get caught. We were obviously running dark, with no lights and radio silence, and all of a sudden this Aldis light started to flash at us out of the pitch black of the China Sea. The captain said to me 'You can read this stuff, can't you?' I said 'Yes.' He said 'What's he saying?' So I had a look and he said 'He wants to know who you are.' So 'Well tell him.' So I told him. He said 'Why are you running without lights?' So he said 'Tell him that there has been a generator failure and we are working on it.' So I did all that. It is quite laborious on the Aldis light. You have to do each letter ?? [inaudible]

[Part 1 0:10:47] Lee: You were responded with same technique?

Lax: Yes. So I did all that but I could tell from the way the guy was operating that he was military because it was very slick and very precise and it was a huge Aldis, whereas merchant ships normally had a portable Aldis, so it was always a bit shaky when the guy was operating it. So I said to him 'I think this is a military ship.' He said 'Just tell him that.' I did that. He said 'We will send a team of engineers on board to

help you fix it.’ So I translated that to him and he said ‘Christ, we don’t want that. Tell him ...What can we tell him?’

[Part 1 0:11:19] Lee: What nationality were they then?

Lax: The people who were signalling? Well it wasn’t clear at that time. It was all in English and international codes. So I said to the captain ‘I wouldn’t do that if I were you. I would just say to him “No need. I have just heard that it is about to be fixed.” Then what you need to do it put some lights on and steam off.’ ‘OK, Tell him that.’ So I said all that to them.’ He said ‘OK. Are you sure that you don’t want us to come and help you?’ I said ‘No, it’s fine, thanks very much.’ Just then we put on a few flickering lights, then started to steam off. He said ‘Where are you bound?’ ‘We are going to Yokohama.’ ‘What’s your cargo?’ I said ‘Jet fuel.’ ‘OK.’ Then I said ‘What ship are you?’ He said ‘We are the Chinese Navy.’ Of course we had the radar off, but when we switched the radar on, the screen was littered with ships. We were actually blundering through the whole of the Chinese flotilla on exercises. So anyway we tootled past them and waited until they had gone away. Then we did a U-turn, went back, did our stuff and carried on. So it was all a bit hairy at the time but we didn’t do that too often.

[Part 1 0:12:34] Lax: Mostly it was fairly conventional runs. I stayed on that ship for about 9 months. Then I came home for a short period. Then I joined another ship. I think I joined that one maybe somewhere in the Far East as well. I stayed on that for about 9 months and then they asked me, while I was on leave, if I would go to Italy, to Trieste, to install some new equipment on a ship that they were gutting and they had rebuilt. It was the old P&O liner *Carinthia*; they had gutted it and rebuilt it as a luxury liner. They were installing on board some very fancy new satellite navigation system, Omega navigation system, and a new radio. So I said ‘Well, I am on leave.’ They said ‘Yes, but it is only a weekend.’ I said ‘OK.’ So I went over to Trieste and got on the ship and sorted this out. I had never seen one before. It was a Satnav system, but it was huge. It was valve-powered; it was about 6-ft tall by about 4-ft wide and had a room all of its own: very very new technology. We did that, and the radio system, and we did the sea trials which were quite difficult because they had a system on board the ship to stop it rolling, a stabilisation system where if the ship rolled that way, they would pump water the other way to counterbalance it.

[Part 1 0:14:14] Lax: The ship went out and the captain put it to about 14 or 15 knots and then he did what in nautical terms is known as a U-turn. He spun it round but they had wired up these pumps the wrong way so instead of compensating, it made it worse. So the ship went over at a terrific angle, smashed in those days about £10,000 worth of crockery that all came out of damage. So we sorted that out and we went out for trials again and I was just commissioning the radio equipment, Anglia, minding our own business in this huge radio room behind the bridge of the ship, and they were busy doing the trials. We were busy furkling and setting up, and I said to the radio officer there, ‘Just press the key down and hold it down while I just fettle this.’ He did that and the ship suddenly changed course. I didn’t think anything of it because we were doing all the manoeuvring. I said ‘That’s OK.’ and carried on. Then we did something else, did it again and the ship changed course. Apparently every time we put this radio power on, it affected the autopilot and changed course. So we had to sort that out.

[Part 1 0:15:28] Lax: Eventually it was all done and I said to the captain 'It's all done now. I'm off.' He said 'Do you know anything about telephone systems?' I said 'Yes.' He said 'Well, do you think you could fix this? We have got some problems with the telephone exchange.' I said 'No. I am going home now.' He said 'Look. I'll tell you what. We will drop you off in Gib if you will just sort out the telephone system.' 'OK.' So we sorted that out and then just before we got to Gib he said... [mobile phone rings] Oh, it has stopped; OK. I said 'OK, I will do that but I only know a little bit about televisions but I will have a go at fixing the television. I had fixed the phone but now it was the television. They had this fancy new television system which was again quite new then. So I said 'But I can't fix it before Gib.' He said 'Well I tell you what: we are going to Florida next, so I will drop you off in Florida and you will just fix the closed circuit television.' So anyway I went across the Atlantic with them, fixed the television and then he said 'Well actually we are a radio officer short. Will you stay on?'

[Part 1 0:16:44] Lee: You were being reeled in, weren't you?

Lax: So in the end I stayed on for 9 months. We ran up and down the west coast of the States, through the Caribbean and so on, and then eventually I left that and I came home. My mother said 'I thought you were only going for the weekend!' Anyway that was a long trip. Then after that I got tired ... I read an article in a climbing magazine – I used to do a lot of climbing in North Wales here – and it was called *Mountaineering in Grahamland*. I forget the name of the author now: Rob somebody. Anyway he was a Fid who had been to Graham Land, and I thought 'This is for me.' So I wrote away to BAS and they said 'Come for an interview.' So I went for an interview and I met this guy Bill Sloman, and I remembered that Bill Sloman was a guy I had spoken to on the phone years and years ago during my fishing days when I was on leave and I had seen an advertisement for radio operators in the Falkland Islands. I had phoned Bill Sloman and over the course of the phone conversation, I realise that I didn't want to go to the Falklands. It wasn't what I wanted at all, and forgot about it. I didn't actually tie that in with BAS or FIDS at the time. Anyway I saw him in Victoria; I think Gillingham Street they used to have their headquarters.

[Part 1 0:18:11] Lee: That's right.

Lax: I had an interview with Bill Sloman and Eric Salmon and a guy called Barry Peters. I went for this interview to be a GA to go to Stonington, dogs and climbing and so on, and during the course of the interview they kept asking me more and more about radio. I thought 'I don't know why they are going on about the radio.' Anyway I answered the questions and eventually Bill Sloman looked me in the eye and he said 'I can get people who can run up Everest in plimsolls but I can't get radio operators, so I am afraid I can't offer you a job as a GA because I can get much better people than you to be GAs, but I am desperately short of radio people.' I said 'Well I can get plenty of work doing radio.' And I said 'I am not so sure that is what I want to do, although I do want to go to the Antarctic.' 'Well I will make you a deal,' he said, 'You go to Halley Bay for one year and the next year I will transfer you to Stonington where you can work as a GA. So you can do a year as a radio operator (wireless operator/ mechanic, whatever they called it) and a year as a GA at Stonington.' I said 'OK.' He said 'I am afraid we can't pay you much in the way of salary.' I remember

saying 'Oh, I didn't know you got paid. I thought you just got your clothes and your food and that was it.' So that must have warmed me to Bill's heart anyway. Off I went. I was booked then to go to Halley.

[Part 1 0:19:47] Lee: Can I just backtrack you slightly before you head off South? Your background was almost perfectly prepared for the Antarctic, wasn't it? You had a military background with your father, so discipline was not going to be a problem, you had been to a boarding school sharing dormitories with lots of other men, you had travelled right round the world several times. You had also experienced severe winter weather off the east coast of the USA. So there was no other kind of job that was perfectly suited for you was there?

Lax: I would have thought so, although you don't think that at the time, but I did feel it was a nice fit. I felt very comfortable about going. I wasn't at all nervous about not being able to repair the equipment, or not being able to fulfil my obligations in terms of radio. I was well aware that there were people who were much better mountaineers than I was. I had done a lot of climbing in the UK and had a little bit of Alpine experience but nothing like some of the people that went down.

[Part 1 0:20:41] Lee: Why did you want to go to the Antarctic?

Lax: I think initially it was the climbing and the sheer rarity of it. As a youth I had actually read a book called *Of Whales and Men* and I wrote to some whaling companies in Sandefjord in Norway to see if I could go down as a radio operator on a whaler, to get down to the South Atlantic. That had sort of fired my imagination and I had done nothing about it; it had sort of just drifted into the past. And on the trawlers I had sailed with a couple of old boys who had been on the whalers, with Salvasons. I wouldn't say it was a burning passion to go to the Antarctic because of that but there were these little germs that had been sown and I was quite interested to go.

[Part 1 0:21:35] Lee: Did you have a romantic notion about it from your childhood? Did you read Scott and Shackleton and ...?

Lax: No, I didn't. I had watched the movie of the TAE before and obviously I remember Edmund Hillary climbing Everest and I remember his Antarctic crossing, as a child, but I can't say I was motivated by that. I very much wanted to get to the Shackletons. For some reason I wanted to get to the Shackleton mountains; I don't know why, and it was one of the things that made me content to go to Halley, because I thought there might be a chance of getting to the Shackletons.

[Part 1 0:22:12] Lee: Was that a scientific inspiration or a romantic inspiration?

Lax: No, I think it was more just to see them and to climb.

[Part 1 0:22:18] Lee: A climbing gene?

Lax: I was never a fanatic climber. You may have interviewed a chap called Dog Holden. Well he is the epitome of the dedicated climber. He is an extremely good climber and I have climbed with Dog. Much better climber than I was. He climbed at a higher level, consistently higher level than I did, but I wasn't motivated by the same

things as he was. But I would like to have got to the Shackletons and the irony is that years later, when I had the chance, I didn't go because I let the other members of the base go and I stayed behind.

[Part 1 0:22:54] Lee: OK. Let's take you on to: was it Southampton you sailed from?

Lax: Yes, I sailed from Southampton on the *Bransfield* and that was in '73, and the girlfriend I had at the time drove down with me to Southampton. We rented a van; we drove down together and I loaded my stuff on the *Bransfield*. We had had a fairly heavy session the night before. I was quite hung over and I said to her 'I am never going to drink again.' and she laughed and laughed and laughed. She said 'You will never give up booze.' So from the moment I set foot on the *Bransfield*, I didn't touch a drop of alcohol for 2½ years. All the time I was on the *Bransfield* going down, all the time I was on base, I didn't have a drop of alcohol, not even the rum sauce. I just thought 'Right, I will show you.' I didn't have a drop.

[Part 1 0:23:49] Lee: Was that a disadvantage socially, because it's all men together, isn't it? And that's what they do, get the beer out.

Lax: I never found it so. People just got used to it. I think in many ways they thought it was a bit more for them. I forget what the ration was. Two cans every other day? It worked out on base we had a bottle of gin, a bottle of Scotch and a bottle of rum a month, shared amongst all of us.

[Part 1 0:24:18] Lee: You are pretty well informed for somebody who didn't drink any?

Lax: Well that was for the first 2½ years and can remember getting back on the boat because I made some very good friends on the boat, being an ex-matelot anyway. I volunteered to do a lot of work on the *Bransfield*. I helped, with a guy called John McClure, to repair the sonar system that wasn't working on the boat. We fixed that for the radio operator and I volunteered to help with all the small boat work, with the boatman called Pete Holloway. I did a lot of small boatwork in some horrendous seas with him and I suppose it was because of my background working on small ships and sailing and so on, I was able to help him out on that.

[Part 1 0:25:05] Lee: So your skills as a seaman were identified by the captain of the ship, were they?

Lax: No, not really. I just volunteered. They just asked and if you showed any aptitude, the crew were happy to have you there, especially with the boat landings and so on. I suppose he may have thought that I was a disposable asset, because if anything happened to me, his crew would still be intact. But I also worked as a greaser on board the *Bransfield*. When one of the donkeyman/ greasers had to be evacuated home, I used to do a watch in the engine room doing all the greasing, the oiling and so on. Then in another phase I also helped the cook. I used to help him make the bread in the galley and so on. So I developed a close relationship with some of the crew on there, two in particular who I have kept in touch with up to this day.

[Part 1 0:25:57] Lee: Were you also mingling with the Fids as well?

Lax: Oh yes, I was always with the Fids, but firstly, it is not a pleasant voyage for somebody who hasn't been to sea before, because the *Bransfield* was basically a flat-bottomed bucket and it rolled like a pig. It had a terrible motion and even though I had long since had my sea-legs on much worse ships than that, there were days when even I felt a bit queasy, and some of the crew; you could see that. The poor old Fid, fresh out of university, they suffered quite badly. So they were quite happy that there was somebody who was willing to go and do the work on the boat, on the scows and so on.

[Part 1 0:26:44] Lee: Who was the captain?

Lax: It was originally a guy called Tom Woodfield, and later on it was Stuart Lawrence.

[Part 1 0:26:50] Lee: Tom Woodfield took his wife, didn't he?

Lax: He did, yes, and that was on the first trip we went down. Quite a shock for many people. She was a very attractive ... She wouldn't have had to have been attractive, but she was attractive, a slim woman who was very gregarious. But she had a sense of ... I was going to say something awful like 'She knew her place.' but what I meant to say was that she knew the effect she was having on people and she behaved very well. She was neither in retreat, and she wasn't too forward. She maintained a very dignified approach throughout, but she did come to Halley Bay, which was a shock to them because they thought all women had a staple in the middle and folded over when you closed the book, because they only had *Playboy* and things like that. But she was a very nice lady.

[Part 1 0:27:43] Lee: Was she the first woman to go to the Halley Bay base?

Lax: I believe she was, yes. I couldn't be sure because there may have been some women on Russian ships who had visited the base in the past but certainly I think she was the first Englishwoman.

[Part 1 0:27:57] Lee: So how was that handled then, because I appreciate that you were there, arriving with her at the same time, so you didn't know the Fids on the base, but ...?

Lax: I didn't see much of that really, because the relief is a very frenetic time and we did have one or two problems with the ice cliff collapsing on the boat and we nearly lost some people. And it was a huge panic for us. There was an awful lot to do and it was slightly complicated by the fact that on the base we used to have movies, which were the old reel-to-reel movies, and we got our movies from the Royal Navy Film Club, which basically had a lead box with usually three movies in each box, with three reels per movie. We had the same system on merchant ships and when you met another merchant ship who was in the same system, you could swap your box with his box and just kept a little tally. Well this particular problem was the ones who had wintered over in '73, which were the people we were relieving, there was a reel missing from one of the films, and it was a film called *Hannibal Brooks* with Oliver Reed in and the last reel was missing. But they watched the first two reels several

times because there weren't enough movies to have a fresh one every week, so inevitably they were repeated.

[Part 1 0:29:17] Lax: So they had watched these two reels over and over again, and they refused to participate in part of the relief until they had seen the third reel. So we gave them the third reel and they watched that and then we carried on, but we had an awful lot to do because they had moved from one base to another: the base that was called Grillage Village (now become known as Halley II I think). They had also built the Armco which was the one we were going into, so they had had a hard time of it, keeping the science running, two bases running and so on. I was pretty occupied with moving the radios, the whole station over in one fell swoop during the night from the old base to the new base. So there was myself and the radio operator (who later went to Adelaide) who eventually married a Falkland Islander and still lives in the Falklands and another radio guy and the outgoing radio guy. We all worked through the night and set the whole thing up: put new aerials up and wired the whole thing up and got it working and we had our hands full really. And on the top of that we had the normal relief with all the boxes coming in and the boxes going out and so on. So I wasn't really aware of Ella's presence during that relief period, I am afraid.

[Part 1 0:30:48] Lee: And I guess very few people were?

Lax: I would think they probably weren't aware of her because she was so discreet and so sensible and so nice. She was a thoroughly nice woman really.

[Part 1 0:30:59] Lee: Just to go back to the collapse of the ice shelf, I have heard this story from other people but I would be interested to hear any eye-witness account you have of that?

Lax: Well fortunately I wasn't there. I was on the base. I saw the damage to the ship.

[Part 1 0:31:15] Lee: Which was what?

Lax: Just caved in part of the side of the ship, the topside of the ship, almost like the ship's rail, was all folded over and damaged¹ and there were some people who had very lucky escapes. They were picked out of the ice; they were just standing on bits of ice in the water and they were picked up with a crane. So they were jolly lucky, but I missed all of that I am afraid.

[Part 1 0:31:39] Lee: Did you have to repair the ship before you could sail back?

Lax: No, she just sailed back with this dinge on the side. It was right up on the top side of the ship.

[Part 1 0:31:49] Lee: Talk a bit about the ... You were the first wintering team in the new base, then?

Lax: Yes.

¹ This happened the previous season, on 29 January 1973. AS.

[Part 1 0:31:54] Lee: So you were above ground, initially?

Lax: No, it was built underground. Well it was actually built in a trench and then the trench was backfilled, the idea being to stabilise it.

[Part 1 0:32:04] Lee: This was the Armco base? Base number ...?

Lax: I think it would be Number III. It was originally built in an Armco shell and inside the shell were wooden huts built on scaffolding and racking, and the idea was: that this Armco being oval shape, or more eggshape (an oblate spheroid sort of shape), that the pressures on it would be equalised and the base wouldn't collapse in the same way that the other base had, where we had huge steel RSJs that were just bent with the sheer weight of the ice and the snow. There isn't much precipitation at Halley Bay, but there is a lot of accumulation, and the minute you put anything on the surface, it changes the flow and you get the wind-tails building up. Gradually it just accumulates on top of the base and we then had to raise the shafts or put an extension on the shaft. The pain in the neck, really, was the garage, because we had to dig the ramp out, and we tried all kinds of tricks to avoid doing that, but ultimately you just had to dig it out each time.

[Part 1 0:33:14] Lee: So this was 'Big Al' Smith's design?

Lax: Yes. He had a big hand in it. Basically it was one long base with a T off where the generator shed was.

[Part 1 0:33:27] Lee: How was it, moving into this new experimental base?

Lax: Well of course we had never experienced anything else, so we didn't know what it was like at all.

[Part 1 0:33:36] Lee: Were there teething problems?

Lax: There were quite a few teething problems. I think the builders had done a fabulous job to do what they had done, but they had been a very undisciplined mob and the quality of the bunkrooms was very variable. I was lucky enough to get one that had been done by a guy called Torchy², the electrician, and he'd had a bit of a tiff with the rest of the group, and to work off his anger, he used to go and do his room. So it was absolutely immaculate. It was fitted out beautifully. The walls were lined with beautiful wood and stained nicely, and it was probably the best bunkroom that was there, and I happened to get that. So I was very lucky. I wasn't so lucky when I went back the next time, as base commander; I got one of the grotty ones. They did vary a lot but they were all unheated. All of the pitrooms (as they were known) were unheated, so you didn't tend to linger there. You went there to sleep and then when you got up, you left.

[Part 1 0:34:50] Lee: Was there a reason for them being unheated?

² Tony Jackson.

Lax: It was partly to try and help with stabilising the base, so you didn't have a lot of heat to dissipate, and it was partly for concerns about fire. So there was no smoking allowed in the bunkrooms, and of course this was in an era when most people smoked. So there was no smoking in the bunkrooms and there was no heating. The other advantage was: it did keep people – well some people – out of their beds, but the difficulties that I had observed during my first two years there were that you seemed to have two kind of base commanders at Halley. One just let people get on and do their own thing and let them get up at any old time of the day or night and just do whatever they wanted, and the other were very very strict, almost with military discipline. When I went back as BC I was able to change that insofar as I was very firm with them about when they got up. I made sure everybody got up in the morning, and was up during the day and I knew where they were. But I let them have a great deal of latitude to the extent that ...

[Part 1 0:36:06] Lax: We always had a lot of other jobs to do around the base that were nobody's job, like digging up the fuel, taking away the rubbish, getting the water, doing the dogs, raising the dumps, that kind of stuff, and in the two experiences I had, one put out a list and said 'Thou shalt appear at 8 o'clock and do this.' and the other one just went and tried to do it himself and would ask people if they would give him a hand. So after the ship left, I had a meeting with the whole base. I told them what the plans were for the year, what the journeys were and so on, and what the targets were. And I told them that I was going to put up a list of the tasks that needed to be done and ask for volunteers. I would say what volunteers I wanted: a driver, an electrician or whatever, and I would expect people to volunteer for them. I would be looking at who volunteered and anybody who didn't volunteer often enough, I would speak to and if the work didn't get done, if I didn't get enough volunteers, we would go back to the strict rota of having to do this that and the other. I never ever had a problem with people volunteering, and they always felt that they had a bit of a say because ...

[Part 1 0:37:18] Lax: One of the worst jobs was chipping away the ice under the huts, because the gap between the huts and the Armco was very small and we had to get rid of the accretion of ice. So you had to go down and lay down on your back under the huts and chip it away and lift it out by bucket – it was a horrid job. And sometimes in the winter we had to do fuel runs in very poor weather and not everybody liked to do that, so I would go round and ask, and sometimes they would say 'I don't feel like going out. Can I do the lounge?' I would say 'Yes, sure, I will put you down for the lounge, but perhaps next week, I will put you down for something outside.' 'That will be OK.' So in a way they had a say in what they did. The other major change I made was that we always used to have what we called a Saturday scrubout, which they did on the ship as well. That was on a Saturday morning.

[Part 1 0:38:10] Lax: Everybody would be allocated a task and we would clean the base from top to bottom, and this scrubout was literally a scrub out. The place was sparkly clean but because I used to make them get up every morning at 8 o'clock, they complained that they never had any time to themselves. I said 'That's OK. Why don't we do the scrubout Friday night? Then you can do whatever you like on Saturday and Sunday. You can stay in bed all day if you like. There is no problem.' So they said 'OK, we will do that.' The older lags said 'It will never work.' but it did. Everybody did what they wanted on the Friday night. The place was done, and then

they would do what they wanted on the Saturday and Sunday, and I believe that that tradition has carried on at Halley, and I think it is the only base that does its scrubout on Friday night, instead of the Saturday. But it just suited everybody so that they all felt that they were having some say in what was going on.

[Part 1 0:39:07] Lee: So, again backtracking slightly, you were obviously learning from the base leaders that you served under. Had you any ambition at that point?

Lax: No, not at all. In fact, what had happened was: on our first winter, soon after the ship left, our base commander was a very experienced ...

[Part 1 0:39:26] Lee: This was Brian Jones?

Lax: Brian Jones, yes. A very experienced GA and climber and I learned a lot from him. He taught me my Antarctic fieldcraft. He was a terrific guy, but he distinguished himself very early on by getting lost. You have probably heard the tale. He was the base commander and I think I am right in saying he was the first dedicated base commander³. Previous to that the base commander had always been a Met man and a base commander or a GA and a base commander. He was the sole base commander. He was helping the Met men with the balloon launch and following it on the radar. The radar was a very old ex-RAF tropicalised hand-driven radar, a bit like the old ack-acks that you moved it by handles and you could change the azimuth and the elevation and so on. You would follow the balloon and then you would get a radar signal. You would read the coordinates out and somebody would write them down, and somebody else would be taking the data from the balloon and he would say 'OK. When it was at this height and this angle, the pressure was this, the temperature was that.'

[Part 1 0:40:40] Lax: It was very primitive but it worked, and that was located off to one side of the base and to get to it you had to walk through all kinds of things: the vehicle park, the fuel drums, cables. Because our cables were above the ice. We put them on wooden stakes and kept them above the ice, And we had one little gap in there where the vehicles went in and out; there the cables went into the ice and back up. And in the blizzard, Brian missed all of these obstacles and marched straight through this gap and straight away from the base, heading off basically south, south and east. So when he didn't appear there was a bit of a panic. We had a look round for him, and he hadn't actually appointed a deputy base commander at that time. Well there was nobody there, really, apart from myself, with any remote knowledge of fieldcraft. I certainly wasn't experienced in Antarctic fieldcraft then. So I organised the search parties, got them all roped up, got them with lights. We put the cloud searchlight pointing upright. We got lots of things and we kept a log of what we did while we were looking for him. I got in touch with Stanley and told them what had happened and what we were doing and they said 'Yes you are doing everything right but don't risk anybody else's life.'

[Part 1 0:42:03] Lax: We went a day and a night looking for him and we didn't find him. After the day and the night the weather eased off. We had a lovely clear day, and we saw this figure walking back towards us. He had walked into the geomagnetic

³ Chinn (1977), Sykes (1968) and Vallance (1971) are in Keith Holmes' winterers list as just BC.

stake lines that we had, and they are all numbered, but he didn't know whether they were numbered sequentially, whether they were going up or whether they were decrementing, and going back to base. So he didn't know which way to go, so he very sensibly dug a hole in the ice with his hands and just lay down and covered himself up. Luckily he had a non-Fid coat which was an ex-Canadian Airforce lined three-quarter length coat which he had managed to acquire, and that he wrapped round himself and he just stayed in the ice. But he was very close to death when we got him back. His core temperature was just on the turn. So we just warmed him up very carefully and brought him back. Then after he recovered, which was very quick because he was a very fit, strong person, he called me into his office. He said 'I have got to make Colin the base commander⁴ and I am sorry I can't make you the deputy because you are a new boy and we really need to keep the first-year people on our side.' I said 'It doesn't bother me. I have no interest at all.' So I went through the first year very happily. During the first year we heard that Stonington was closing.

[Part 1 0:43:51] Lee: I will come to that in a minute, sorry. Let's just go back to the Brian Jones episode. What were the feelings on base about that? Was there a sense that he had been silly? Was your respect being reduced?

Lax: Not at all. I can only speak for myself. I didn't feel anything about it. I just thought 'There but for the grace of God ...' because how on earth he had managed to walk through all those obstacles without hitting them is a miracle. When we went out and looked at it again, we thought the chances were a million to one, I think, that he could have done it.

[Part 1 0:44:25] Lee: But you were fearful that he wasn't going to come back? After a day and a half, you must have been worried?

Lax: We were starting to get a bit worried. I thought we would be looking for a body, and I didn't want to extend the search to the cliffs because that was the most likely place he would have come harm really. They were I think about 60 feet then so anybody falling over that would not have a snowball in Hell's chance. But we were continuing to look. We went up early in the morning, at first light, well as soon as the snow stopped ..., the blizzard stopped, to look for him again. We were going to widen our search and use vehicles and go further. But then we saw him and picked him up and brought him in.

[Part 1 0:45:13] Lee: And you put on a searchlight so that he could find it, if he was out and about, he could find the base at night?

Lax: Yes. We had a thing called a cloud searchlight which the Met men used. It just went straight up and then they would measure the height of the cloud base. It wasn't my idea; it was somebody else on the base, I forget now. They said 'Well let's put the searchlight on so if he is out there, he might at least see the searchlight.' But he didn't ever see it.

[Part 1 0:45:37] Lee: Was there any change of practice, any lessons learned from that episode? He was out of his own, which of course isn't ??? [inaudible]

⁴ Colin Cuthbert. Ken means deputy base commander.

Lax: There were. I think people were a lot more cautious, and we very quickly went into a training routine for the other people, and we encouraged them to go on a manhauling expedition that taught them how to put tents up in a blow, showed them where the emergency stores were, explained to them that the numbers did actually increment as you went further away from base. And we put up higher markers and so on and so forth. But we didn't change anything much because ... I don't know, maybe I was so involved in my own world, but I was never aware of anybody thinking 'Oh what a clot?' or anything like that. We just thought it just happened and it could easily happen. So I used to take people out who didn't travel much and say to them 'Just make a footprint in the snow there.' They would do that and then in a blizzard the footprint disappears almost immediately and they thought 'Crikey!' and they realised then how difficult it would be to find your way back.

[Part 1 0:46:48] Lee: Was it a frustrating year for you, because you really wanted to be a GA, and there wasn't much scope for being a GA at Halley, so were you a frustrated Field Assistant?

Lax: I wasn't at all frustrated actually because I developed a routine. Brian showed me how to run the dogs. I had certain radio scheds I had to keep – they were timed – where we had to set the Met information regularly, and scientific reports. So there were certain times of the day when I had to be in the radio room. So I got into a routine of getting up very early and running the dogs before the first sched. I used to get up at six and then I used to run the dogs. I used to just tie a rope around my waist and ski behind them, and I would drive them down onto the sea ice, down the ramps onto the sea ice, round to the penguins, right to the edge of the water, and bring them back and then put them on their spans and then go and do my radio scheds and do the rest of the day.

[Part 1 0:47:52] Lee: So you would do that alone?

Lax: Yes, I used to do that alone. I used to just leave a note with the Met man, and tell him where I was going, but I used to do it alone, which I doubt I would be allowed to now.

[Part 1 0:48:04] Lee: Did you take a radio?

Lax: No, I just went as I was. I was careful where I went. In the winter time I ran the dogs as well, all through the winter. I used to keep a little tunnel open from the garage ramp, up to the top, and I cut some kennels for the dogs in the ice.

[Part 1 0:48:21] Lee: That was you, was it?

Lax: Yes.

[Part 1 0:48:24] Lee: On your own, or with a team?

Lax: I think myself and John McClure did it mainly, with a chainsaw, and we cut the kennels into the ice near one of the shafts and brought the dogs in in the winter. I cut four kennels so I used to rotate them round: clean one out and put the other one in.

Then I used to get them harnessed up and I used to ski out of the ramp and then go out, but in the winter when it was dark, I never ran them if it was less than -40. Other people do but I didn't, and at first I used to take a Tilley with me. So I would be skiing behind the dogs with this Tilley lamp, and then I realised that the dogs could see perfectly well without the Tilley lamp so I stopped taking that. I used to do a huge circle round the base because I could see the base lights, and I used to do that. That way I ran the dogs all the year round and then in the summer Brian, John McClure and myself ... During the winter we had made a special lightweight sledge with lightweight sledging boxes and equipment and we went out in the field with the two dogs and the sledge, unsupported. We took everything with us.

[Part 1 0:49:38] Lee: Whose idea was to create the underground kennel?

Lax: I think it was something we had picked up from Bunny Fuchs' film about TAE. I don't recall any moment when somebody said 'We ought to build a kennel for them.' Somebody said they ought to come in for the winter and I thought 'Well what are we going to do with them?' So we built the kennels but I don't know what they actually did before in the old base. I suppose when they had all the dogs at Halley I suppose they must have done the same thing⁵. I didn't really think about it. I don't know how it originated but as I was in charge of the dogs, I took it upon myself to do it with John McClure, and we just got a chainsaw and went ahead and did it.

[Part 1 0:50:30] Lee: Your feeling was that the dogs would not have survived the winter on the surface?

Lax: I thought they probably would have but I thought that it was an unnecessary burden because in kennels the temperature would have been about -20 because once you get that deep under the ice and you cut a hole in the ice, the temperature there is more or less the average temperature of what it is topsides, so it would have been about -20. So it wasn't overly hot or overly cold for them so they were all right, but in the field I have been out with the dogs in cold weather and bad weather, and they just curl up and seem to survive.

[Part 1 0:51:05] Lee: You were looking forward to going to Stonington for your second year and then this radio message arrived. Do you remember what it said?

Lax: It was a general message to all the bases saying something like 'This is the last winter at Stonington. It is going to be closed and a new base will be built at Rothera.'

[Part 1 0:51:22] Lee: You were on a promise, weren't you?

Lax: I was indeed, yes. I was quite angry about it and I can remember saying to Brian Jones 'Aren't you cross about it?' and he said 'No. You seem more angry about it than I am.' Because he used to tell me all about Stonington and the run up Sodabread and all that stuff, and I was looking forward to going. This came, I would think, somewhere in the winter, deep in the winter. It wasn't at the beginning or the end, and I remember being a bit aggrieved and then I thought 'Well actually I like it here very much.' So I wasn't worried because I had built my own little life. I had the two dogs

⁵ There was a dog tunnel at Halley II, built by Graham Wright and Harry Wiggans.

and I did a lot of miles with them. I did more than 500 miles one year with them, which is more than a lot of people have the pleasure of doing, and because it is just the two dogs, you have to do a lot more of the work yourself. I was really quite happy. By then I had trained the doctor to do some of the radio work, so I was able to go away for extended periods and he was able to run the radio station for me. He enjoyed doing that. In fact I did it with both doctors: with Tom Pearce in the first year and with Eric Harvey in the second year, and the interesting thing is that both of them went on to be radio hams, as a result of their experience on the radio. But they were very good and it gave me time to get out and I spent a lot of time in the field some years.

[Part 1 0:52:57] Lee: Did it occur to you that FIDS might have known, when you were being interviewed, that Stonington was about to be closed?

Lax: I always had the fear that Bill Sloman knew exactly what was going on, yes, but I didn't really care because when I came to the end of my second year I told them that I would like to stay for a third year. I didn't want to go home; I still had things to do. Dick Laws was the Director then and he had come down to Halley. He was talking to me and I said 'Well, I would like to stay for a third year.' He said 'We have got an operator.' I said 'That's OK; I could stay as a GA.' He said 'We would actually like you to come back to the UK and help us prepare and then come back to Halley as BC.' I said 'Yes, I don't mind doing that.' And that is how it happened. I didn't have any inkling or anything like that.

[Part 1 0:53:49] Lee: Were you surprised, to go back as Base Commander?

Lax: I was, yes, but I would have gone back as cook, really. I wasn't too bothered. I wasn't really expecting it. I wasn't expecting it at all, and I wasn't really aware of the burden that comes with being a BC.

Lee: Let's come to that shortly. Why was it so good? What's so great about being in the Antarctic at Halley?

Lax: Well Halley was just a fabulous place to me because it was everything you wanted it to be, and you could do whatever you wanted. It was a 'can do' sort of place. For instance, I was always terrible at DIY and carpentry, so I used to help the builder a lot – Jack Temple who passed away last year or the year before last – and I was his 'lad'. So in between scheds I would always help Jack because I wanted to learn about that sort of stuff, and I spent a lot of time with him. He taught me a lot about woodwork and carpentry. I am still not much good at it, but everything I did, I learned from Jack, and I was just very very happy to do it. Then in the mornings when you went up and you looked out at the ice and you could see what you wanted in it. It was so beautiful, the colours in the ice and the snow. If you ever go inside a crevasse, the colours inside the crevasse are just so wonderful, and when you took the dogs and you went up the hinge zone onto the polar plateau, and you got up there to a little depot called Crossroads, you could just look south and you think there is nothing there. Once or twice I was up there and I saw a mirage of the Shackleton Mountains – or maybe they were the Therons, I don't know – we saw a mirage of the mountains and it just was so wonderful. You could be up there and you could look out at the frozen seas and the skies. In the night time there was the aurora to see and it was just

fabulous to be out there, just to witness it all and to be part of it. I never ever tired of it. Every morning at 6 o'clock I used to be out there even if it was blowing quite hard. If I felt I could still see where I was going, I would go out with the dogs and give them a good run.

[Part 1 0:56:21] Lee: A couple of quick questions: were you doing radio ham work yourself?

Lax: I did very little actually. I should have done a lot more because I know that there are radio hams who are keen to get these contacts, and I was a licensed radio ham myself, but I never actually did very much.

[Part 1 0:56:40] Lee: That suggests that you weren't that worried about being in contact with the rest of the planet?

Lax: No, not at all. In fact I can tell you that I did not listen to the BBC News for 12 months. I listened to it on Christmas Day and I listened to it on the next Christmas Day. I didn't listen at all in between. I used to listen on the short wave occasionally to the Swiss radio, and I can remember once being about halfway up the Hinge Zone and we were camped and we used to take a little transistor radio with us, with short wave on it, and I picked up Radio Luxemburg, which I thought was an ionospheric freak, but we actually picked up Radio Luxemburg.

[Part 1 0:57:27] Lee: Jimmy Savile, Pete Murray?

Lax: Yes, it was Pete Murray and his cat. No who was it had a cat? Somebody had a cat. I don't know, but yes, we picked up a bit of Radio Luxemburg for a while. But I didn't do a lot of radio hamming. I did mostly in Morse rather than on the phone. There were plenty of people who did, but I didn't, no.

[Part 1 0:57:47] Lee: Another quick question, if I may: was the old base completely abandoned, or was it still being used for anything?

Lax: It was still being used. I used to go over there quite a lot. We stored quite a bit of stuff over there and in fact, when I went back as base commander, rather than store all the food in dumps outside, I stored it in the old base because (a) it was much easier to get at and so on and so forth, and we used it for storage until I left. We still used it for storage. It was collapsing still, but we had all of our foodstuffs in there, some radio spares and that sort of stuff. So it was still used and people used to go over there sometimes just for something to do, go and have a poke around.

[Part 1 0:58:33] Lee: A bit of a garden shed, you mean.

Lax: Yes, that sort of thing. We actually ran power over there from the genny shed, so there was electrical power over there. We just had a little switch in the genny shed, with a board, so if anybody was over there, they could say that they had gone over so we would know where they were. And of course it was the source of Iain Levack's accident, where he hurt himself very badly.

[Part 1 0:58:57] Lee: Who was that, had the accident?

Lax: Iain Levack, the doctor.

[Part 1 0:58:59] Lee: Can you tell me the story of that?

Lax: Yes. Iain Levack was the doctor the year I was BC, Scottish guy, extremely tough. He was a member of the SAS as a Territorial, He has only just retired from that; he has done several tours at Camp Bastion, and as we speak he is on Tristan da Cunha doing a 6-month stint, with his wife, as a doctor. He has retired now from the NHS. One of his tricks ... Because I used the old base as a storage place, I kept the shaft open, and it had a gantry with a rope that went all the way down the shaft, so you could hook something on at the bottom, then you hooked to other end of the rope onto a vehicle. The vehicle reverses, it comes up and you swing it round and put it on the sledge. And I saw him, in the summer, leap onto this rope and abseil down.

[Part 1 1:00:00] Lax: I said to him 'Don't do that in the winter, because the ice will form and the friction won't melt the ice. It will just freeze straight away and you will go down like a rocket.' 'OK, Chief.' he said. Well one day he ... I was going to my bunkroom and his bunkroom was opposite mine, and I heard this groan. He said 'Chief, is that you?' I said 'Yes. What's the matter?' He said 'I fell down in the old base.' I said 'How did you do that?' He said 'I fell down the ladder.' 'I said 'How far did you fall?' He said 'All the way.' Well I knew then that he couldn't have done that because the ladders went down in stages. You went down like that to a stage and then you went down like that to another stage. I said 'Did you abseil down?' He said 'Yes.' And he rocketed down and landed on his bottom. Well it was about – I would say – maybe 40 feet or more. Prior to that, the day before, they had stored some Dexion lengths there and rather than lower it all down, they just threw them down into the snow at the bottom, so they were at the bottom like the bamboo spikes at the bottom of an elephant trap, and he missed those luckily. But he crushed his vertebra, his knee has gone up and blacked his eye, and damaged his nose a bit. So we had to look after him. It was far too late for any rescue.

[Part 1 1:01:30] Lax: He was very very strong and very *compos mentis*. We had an old X-ray machine there which we got working. One of the guys, Andy Quinn, who was a geophysicist, I think was a frustrated doctor, so he took a large role in organising the X-rays, taking them and then showing them to Iain so that Iain could look at them and say what he thought it was. We were in touch with the Stanley doctor by radio but not much help he could do, and Iain cured himself. He did a lot of exercises every day: a little bit more, a little bit more and then he got to the point where he could actually jump off a paperback book. He jumped off the book and that was a huge step forward. Then he jumped off bigger books, then he jumped off rungs of ladders. He was doing a lot of exercise. Then by the time the summer came, he was able to go off on a jolly and have some time in the field. But if it had been a weaker person, we would have been in serious problems but he was the major problem that we had in terms of injuries, and that was all due to that. We still keep in touch with him. In fact he was the best man at our wedding and I still see him quite often.

[Part 1 1:02:51] Lee: How's his back?

Lax: He is a little bit shorter than he was, but since then he has run marathons and as I said, he is back in the TA. He was in Serbia several times. I think he did two or three tours at Camp Bastion in Afghanistan. He was a consultant anaestheologist at a teaching hospital in Dundee before he retired. So he went on to do great things and he had the most unpopular experiment on base. Part of his medical research was basically to drive a person to exhaustion and see how long it took. So he had a bike that we had to ride. We were connected up to all of the ... Everything that we exhaled, all the oxygen content was analysed. The definition of exhaustion I think among medical men, is that when you can't get enough oxygen into your body any more. So he had this bicycle with different weights on, that were called I think kilo-pons or kilo-pascals or something, that put the force in. They became known as 'killer pillocks'.

[Part 1 1:04:01] Lax: You started off riding it fairly easily and it got more and more until it got to the maximum, and there were very few people who actually managed to get to the maximum; I never ever did. But at the end of all the research, he analysed each person to see who had become more fit and who had become less fit, and out of everybody, I was the person who had become more fit, which was a tribute to how unfit I was, I think, when I went down. But he also used to measure the subcutaneous fat on the Fids, and he got very frustrated with the fact that he couldn't always be sure of measuring it in the same place. So he put a stitch through everybody; so we all had a big black stitch, so he knew exactly where he could take his measurements. It was voluntary; there were two or three of them who didn't participate but everybody else did. But he was the only guy who badly hurt himself.

[Part 1 1:04:57] Lee: Let's take a pause and reconvene.

Lax: Right.

[Part 1 1:05:01] [End of Part One]

[Part 2 0:00:00] Lee: Ken Lax, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 23rd of September 2012. Ken Lax, Part Two.

[Part 2 0:00:10] Lee: Because you were wintering in the new base at Halley for the first time, you were transferring things from the old base to the new base, including some scientific programmes, so is there a story to tell there? What science were you having to transfer and was it interrupted in the process?

Lax: A lot of the work had been done by the wintering team but there was a certain point where we had to switch off the old base and switch on the new base. Some of the geophysical programmes and the met programmes had to be moved over and the radio station had to be moved over. So everything had been prepared in the new base but the kit hadn't physically been transferred. So it was all switched off after the last scheds, packed up and trundled across to the new base, taken down the shafts and installed in the new radio room, in my case, and all wired up, some of it a little bit jury rigged. We got it all wired up in time for the first morning sched with Port Stanley. On the radio side I was helped by the radio operators who were going down to Adelaide and Stonington. They helped me and the outgoing radio operator, a guy

called John Burke, he helped. He had done all the preparation work, and everything got to a point where it was working in time for the next day.

[Part 2 0:01:40] Lax: The geophysics was more difficult. I didn't participate in that but they had things such as ozone measurements to make and equipment to transfer to new locations and new huts. The riometer had to be transferred and quite a bit, I think, of the mechanical stuff related to the generators had to be shifted over at the last moment. It all went very well. I was very lucky in that when I arrived, the group that had been there, although they had had their odds between the different teams in the over-wintering period, they had basically established two separate communities. So there were the basic facilities in the new base such as the kitchen was working, the toilets were working, such as they were, and the bedrooms were finished and the main geophysics offices were practically finished. So we had two overwintering chippies with us to finish off the rest of the base, but the science went on uninterrupted which we were all very pleased about.

[Part 2 0:03:02] Lee: You were talking about the ozone observations that were going on. Did you have any sense how important that was at the time?

Lax: No, we didn't. If the people who were doing it did, they didn't ever say so, and I think they would have done.

[Part 2 0:03:17] Lee: Did you get a sense of how rigorous they were being?

Lax: We knew that they were important, but to us, we were given the responsibility to do something and we did it. So if it said the Met man had to go out every three hours whatever, then he did, and if something broke, we fixed it, and we kept things running.

[Part 2 0:03:36] Lee: So when the news broke a decade later about the ozone hole, did that come as a surprise, a shock, or were you ...

Lax: Yes it did really because it wasn't something that I was terribly involved in but during the winter I obviously stuck my nose in and asked what it was, and I used to help with some observations. I said 'Why is it so important? What are we doing? What is ozone?' I thought it was the salty air you breathed in at the seaside. They explained to me what it was. I had become interested in the ionosphere and the upper atmosphere, the various layers of gases and how they behaved. I found that very interesting. They said ... Well the way they explained it to me was: it is difficult to compare with other results because some people are measuring in apples and some people are measuring in oranges, so we have got to standardise the way the measurements are taken and how it is done. That was part of what their remit was. We weren't aware of what we were doing as being so important.

[Part 2 0:04:38] Lee: One of the worries that that scientific team had in the mid-80s, Brian Gardiner and his colleagues, was the quality of the readings that had been taken by your average Fid down in the Antarctic, and although they knew all their calculations were spot on, what they didn't know was whether the information they had been getting from the Antarctic was also, the readings had been spot on.

Lax: Yes. That's always a concern for people doing research. It's a concern that I still have today when I send people out in the field to take measurements. You say 'Have you done it right?' 'Oh yes, I have done it right.' 'Well how did you do it?' And in this day and age we have quite strict written procedures, and method statements about how people do it, and I don't think we were so rigorous then. This certainly rebounded on us in the ionospherics programme we had at Halley Bay because on the year before I went it, the two chaps who had been there had been very remiss in their work and they had not completed the work, either in the data collection or the analysis. So we had rather poor quality data; it hadn't been analysed and grouped and it hadn't been sent back on the ship. The embarrassment was that it was a joint venture with Dartmouth in the US and we hadn't sent them the tapes. So one of the things I had to do was: I had to force them to catch up on all their analysis, improve the quality of the work they were doing, and get rid of the back log for all these tapes. There was a great deal of resistance to that, and this was the rat's nest that 'Tiger' Pinnock stepped into. He was the new boy, dead keen, ...

[Part 2 0:06:20] Lee: Mike Pinnock?

Lax: Yes, Mike Pinnock. And of course he was totally outvoted and overwhelmed by these other two. So I sat down with them and I went through it with those two and with Tiger – Mike Pinnock – and told them how it was going to be and what they had to do. And actually every evening, after supper, I used to go and sit in the beastie hut with them while they caught up on their results, and I used to keep a daily tally of what they had done, what analysis they had done, what was still outstanding. Because as well as doing the current work, they were also having to catch up on the old work, and that was a huge burden on Mike Pinnock, both from the attitude of the two that were there and from his own personal commitment. It was very hard for him so we gave him a lot of support in those times and eventually we pulled it through.

[Part 2 0:07:18] Lax: Now these two characters: one of them was called [REDACTED]. He was known as [REDACTED] which should have been a clue to his demeanour, and in the previous year he had just been left to do whatever he liked. He used to sleep all day and then work a bit at night, and I wouldn't let him do that. I used to make him get up at 8 o'clock every morning, turn up for breakfast. If he didn't eat his breakfast, hard luck, and he had to go and do his work, and he was pretty resentful, and unfortunately he had to share a bunkroom with another problem character that we brought in with us. And eventually [REDACTED], if I am not mistaken, slept in the loft for a while but eventually he went back to his bunkroom. But the other guy, [REDACTED], he was one of those rare people who was extremely gifted in [REDACTED] but at the price of other parts of his character, and when you could get him to work and do things, what he did was really very very good, and I don't think he ever realised how very very good he was, but he was very good. But he was very undisciplined and if something didn't interest him very much, he wouldn't do it, which was why they had fallen behind on these works. But when we got him fired up, he did some excellent work.

[Part 2 0:08:48] Lax: Part way through the year I sent a message to HQ to say that I was still sitting on top of these people. We were still getting the results but the attitude of these two was very very poor and my recommendation would be that they didn't receive their end of term bonus (because we used to get a 10% bonus at the end of the

trip which cancelled out the 10% Falkland Islands tax we had to pay). And during the course of the year, [REDACTED] turned around. He still had the several social graces he was lacking, but his work was good and the [REDACTED] work which he did was good, and I recommended that his bonus should be reinstated, and I was sorry to hear last year, he told me that he didn't actually get his bonus. Which was sad, really, because he did pull himself round. The other guy never did. Unless you sat over him, he just would not do anything.

[Part 2 0:09:50] Lee: This was in 1977. You were base commander. So how do you balance those two forces: one is keeping peace on the base and not having a stink, a mood, but also getting the work done?

Lax: Well I was lucky in that I'd had Brian Jones as BC and then I'd had Kenn Back, and they were chalk and cheese. Brian Jones was not well educated in the conventional sense. He was very capable at what he did. Kenn Back had a classics degree. Brian identified things that needed to be done, allocated those tasks to people and then saw that they were done, in a rather militaristic way. Kenn Back used to just bumble around and do his own things. He would get up at the crack of dawn and bake the bread because our cook had trouble getting up in the mornings. He never used to get up in the morning; he would lie in bed until about 11 o'clock. We used to get up for breakfast and there would be nothing there. Well Kenn would get up and do the breakfast, and I would say to him 'Why don't you get the cook up to do the breakfast?' So he said 'Ah well, I don't know ...'

[Part 2 0:11:11] Lax: So Kenn used to do everything by himself. He was a very hard worker but you would see him out on the bondu raising drums by himself or putting up dunnage, lifting cables, whatever. He was very, almost like a luddite in terms of equipment, electronics and machinery. He didn't trust Muskegs and skidoos. He either walked or ran. He used to run behind the dogs. He used to take them out but he used to run behind them. He was very fit. I thought 'There has got to be a balance between the two.' The technique won't work for everybody but what worked for me was: every night before I went to bed, I would sit in my little office and I would imagine a clock in front of me. I would have people every five minutes at every hour of the clock. I would think about them and I would just think 'What's Pete Witty been doing today? How's he been feeling? What does he need to do? How's Honk getting on? Is he happy up in the loft? What does he need to be doing?'

[Part 2 0:12:24] Lax: And I would run through all of them and when you do it often enough, you get a very strong sense of how people are performing, how they are failing, what they need. Do they need to get out a bit more? Do they need to stay in a bit more? Do they need a bit less pressure? Do they need a bit more pressure? How are the programmes going? How are we doing on the reporting for the science? I would go round and see how they were. I used to help with some of the scientific programmes when I was BC. I used to help the chippy and I used to help the electrician and so on. I used to go all round and help them and get a feel for where they were. But the strongest, the best thing I did was to make sure everybody got up and had a routine because in the winter time it is very easy to get out of kilter. Because it is dark outside, and it is obviously dark underneath the ice, when you wake up you don't know whether it's 3 in the morning or 3 at night.

[Part 2 0:13:24] Lee: How did you learn that technique? How did you learn about science, because, let's face it, you were an able-bodied seaman primarily, weren't you?

Lax: No, I used to do a lot of work on deck, but I volunteered to do that. I was actually one of the ship's officers. I was the radio and radar and electronics officer.

[Part 2 0:13:39] Lee: But you weren't a scientist as such?

Lax: No, but I had science training in the radio side of things. For example I knew a lot about ionospherics before I went down.

[Part 2 0:13:50] Lee: The man management skills? Was that learned on ship as well?

Lax: I don't know where I learned them really. I think the biggest tip I got was from my father-in-law who told me it would be a good idea to try and put yourself in the shoes of the people that you have got responsible for you, and that would give you a better insight to it. So I put that into practice. But you are right; it is very difficult to maintain discipline when you have got no ability to sanction anybody. You can't fine anybody; you can't send them home; you can't stop his wages; you can't stop him going on holiday or anything like that. So you have to win people through just by the force of your character and what you want to do. The biggest secret is actually thinking about people, not just as a person to dig a hole to dig up some oil drums ... For instance we had one tractor mechanic, Bunny Houlcroft, who I would say was probably only a mediocre mechanic and we had Pete Witty who was the diesel mechanic, who by any standards was an exceptional mechanic. He had Michael Davies working with him ('Honk') who was also an exceptional mechanic.

[Part 2 0:15:09] Lax: So we had two exceptional mechanics and a mediocre one. He was always in their shadow and he used to spend a lot of time doing his indents and writing his books. He was also rather lazy, but he was a terrific base asset because he was the base jester and he was everybody's pal, and he was the glue that kept a lot of that society together. So whilst he was, if he had been on his own, a bit lazy, a bit ineffective, as part of the team he was good. Pete Witty used to come to me sometimes and complain bitterly about him because he hadn't taken the head off this tractor and he hadn't done this and he hadn't done that. I said 'Well he does have a value. There's the two of you and if you have got your stuff set out right, you can help Bunny do his.' He said 'We shouldn't be carrying him. We shouldn't be doing this.' I said 'No, he has got a place.' And at one of the reunions recently, Pete said 'I have always remembered that and you were right.' His value wasn't as a mechanic necessarily; his value was as part of the base mood, the mood of the people was driven a lot by him.

[Part 2 0:16:25] Lee: Before you became base commander in 1977, you spent some time back at HQ. Dick Laws insisted that you came back to Britain for a while. Is that right? I am interested to know why Dick Laws was in Halley in the first place. Was there a ...?

Lax: It was his initiation trip. He had just taken over from Bunny Fuchs and it was his first round trip of all the bases.

[Part 2 0:16:50] Lee: So he brought you back to Britain. You had about 18 months I think⁶, at Cambridge. What were you doing?

Lax: Was it as long as that? Gosh! It would have been I suppose, yes.

[Part 2 0:17:03] Lee: Unless I am wrong about the year.

Lax: It was probably about that, yes. Well I helped with the logistics side of things and I was a contact for the people on base about ordering more prismatic compasses or spares for this, or spares for that. I was just generally helping the logistics people, and sitting in occasionally on interviews for people to go down with me. But my main interest at the time was climbing in North Wales. I had a Mini Clubman at the time and I used to go off to Wales for the weekend and come back at the next week. So I used to spend a lot of time climbing. I used to spend a lot of hours in the office but then I used to have extra time off to go and do bits and pieces.

[Part 2 0:17:50] Lee: So it was a busy year, not a light year?

Lax: Gosh yes. I spent quite a bit of time in the Alps, climbing.

[Part 2 0:17:55] Lee: I meant workwise. [laughs]

Lax: Workwise? No I found it relatively easy actually. They didn't seem to do very much at HQ because they were so good at it. A lot happened without you realising how much they did. So there was very little I had to pick up and do, very little they asked me to do. I can remember going round getting things organised for people on base when they needed this, that and the other. I can remember making a few presentations and so on. And of course I was briefed by the ionospheric people about what had been going on at Halley and why they weren't happy and what needed to be done. But I don't remember the time as being busy. It was more like being back at college really. There was lots to learn and lots to do.

[Part 2 0:18:50] Lee: I get the sense, from other Fids I have talked to, that if you were in the Antarctic, you sometimes felt that BAS HQ didn't know what it was doing. You want things, you ask for things, and it was a bit flimsy, the relationship between the bases and HQ. So having been in both places at once, were you aware of that and was there anything that could be done about it?

Lax: I was aware of it when I was on base, and Halley had a reputation of being very aggressive, sending quite aggressive telex messages back to base, and it wasn't helped ...

[Part 2 0:19:27] Lee: Now you were receiving these?

Lax: No no. But it wasn't helped by some of the typographical errors. One of the classical ones that was pinned up on the board was from Barry Peters, where the radio op before me was bleating that he hadn't got certain spares and he wanted to do this

⁶ Chris is wrong about this. It would only have been about 6 months, in 1976.

that and the other and Barry said 'You will just have to soldier on.' But it got mistyped and it said 'You will just have to soldier on.' So it sort of went into the vocabulary, about having to 'soldier on' if things weren't right. But I noticed these very acerbic exchanges between Brian Jones and HQ, and Kenn Back and HQ, and having been in Communications before I was there, I realised that it is very easy to misinterpret a remark that is in text, that is written and you can imply things that aren't there, and that you should never take any offence at what is written in a telex because it might not have been written with that intent. You should always look for the bright side. So when I was at Halley I took great pains never to write any acerbic messages back to HQ, and I wouldn't let anybody else send any messages like that to HQ. So if there was a problem or a shortage we would just report it and say we would like this again next relief and so on. So we spent the whole year with very cordial telex exchanges and the people on base learned better respect for HQ, and when the people came from HQ they were made very welcome. It was our boast that when we arrived there was hardly anything mechanical that was working but when we left every single machine on base worked. You could go to into any vehicle and turn the key and it would start, which was a tribute to Pete and Honk, and to Michael Houlcroft as well, that they had made that happen and the base was in good shape. All the maintenance work had been done; all the stores had been kept properly; everything was well indented and taken care of. So it is probably a function of isolation. If you are isolated from somewhere, you imagine these problems and you get quite aggressive about them.

[Part 2 0:22:01] Lax: I can remember when they sent the telex to say that they were combining the geophysics and the met groups to be more economical with things and to maximise the utilisation. What a fuss and a palaver there was from the geophysics guys about having to be met men, because geophysics guys were, to a man, graduate physicists; met men were a ragbag. Some were chemistry graduates; some weren't graduates at all; some were physics graduates and they were always rather looked down on, the met men. And all of a sudden, the geophysicists had to be met men, and we just had to sit down and talk it through. Some of them went off on a little break, in the winter, into a caboose which was basically like a Portacabin on a sledge, and we sent them over there and then they spent the time there together chatting and so on. And they came on the radio and they had such a list of grievances about this combination of the two departments. I said 'When you get back, we will talk about it.' They came back and we sat down and we talked about it and everything went smoothly. But it is easy to let your emotions spiral out of control. There is nobody there to put in a counter-view or ... If everybody is agreeing with you all the time you get this spiral of aggression and you need to dampen it fairly quickly and just say 'Well look, there is another point of view.'

[Part 2 0:23:26] Lee: So in your year back at base, were you observing that coming through on the wires, that kind of situation?

Lax: When I was radio operator, before I was the BC, I could see all this.

[Part 2 0:23:38] Lee: You could see it in the Antarctic When you were back at HQ, could you see it coming in?

Lax: Yes, but not directed to me because I was just at the bottom of the food chain really. I was very unimportant.

[Part 2 0:23:50] Lee: That shaped your approach in your year as base commander?

Lax: Not so much what happened at HQ. I don't think any of that shaped my approach. It was what I saw with Kenn Back and with Brian Jones. Kenn used to get castigated terribly but then he used to send off some fairly strong stuff, and I can remember when they transferred away the responsibility of us sending our met info to Stanley. We had to send it to South Georgia and the radio operator on South Georgia was pretty useless. So all the work we were doing, sending all our stuff in a timely manner, he was cocking up. So I sent a message to HQ, which Kenn obviously had to approve, saying 'This is a waste of time. We are doing all this work, sending all this information, and it is getting cocked up in South Georgia.' South Georgia were monitoring our communications to Stanley which they shouldn't have been doing but they were, and they picked this up and it caused a great deal of enmity and the operator came on to me. I said 'It is perfectly true. You are totally stretched, you are not a particularly good operator. You are not a professional operator. You have now got a lot of work to do and you can't do it, and it's just cocking everything up. You should have more resources there. You need some help.'

[Part 2 0:25:19] Lax: Anyway he gradually calmed down but Kenn got a rocket from HQ for allowing me to send such a message. So I thought 'There has got to be a balance between factual reporting and this aggression that is coming over.' I can remember Kenn looking at the list of things that they were going to send us, and he asked for more tomato ketchup, something like that, and they came back at him with such vitriol about this that they knew what people wanted, blah blah blah. Kenn replied that he was commenting more upon the eating habits of Fids than he was on what HQ were sending down and then he made some reference to his Indonesian influence, which I think was probably over the heads of the people at the other end. But we didn't have any of that when I was there. We got on with the work, we all pulled together and we didn't have any adverse comments at all.

[Part 2 0:26:18] Lee: I have talked to a lot of Fids and they always say 'Oh yes, it was perfectly harmonious on base. We all got on terribly well together. There were never any personality or psychological problems.' I have always been deeply suspicious.

Lax: Quite right.

[Part 2 0:26:31] Lee: Would you say that was the norm, or ...?

Lax: No, I would say quite the opposite. The tales we used to hear, there were certain people who were ostracised or people who behaved badly or people who never fulfilled their obligations in terms of their work or their science. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[Redacted text block]

[Part 2 0:27:59] Lax: [Redacted text block]

[Part 2 0:29:28] Lax: [Redacted text block]

[Part 2 0:31:08] Lee: [Redacted text block]

Lax: No. [Redacted text block]

[Part 2 0:31:27] Lee: Was it a good year?

⁷ The poem *The Shooting of Dan McGrew* by Robert W. Service.

Lax: A very good year, yes. It was ...

[Part 2 0:31:34] Lee: Despite all this?

Lax: Yes. I mean I have highlighted the bad parts but it was largely harmonious. The beastie men eventually pulled together and we got the whole programme done. When we left it was in excellent state. The building works that had been neglected had been done. All the vehicles were working. The science had been good. They went off to the Shackletons on time with all their kit organised and so on. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I think the only other aggravation was between the cook and Iain Levack; for some reason they just didn't get on together at all. But it was just one of those things. The place was big enough that they didn't have to be in the same place at the same time. Because the general mood was one of harmony, these little bits of friction just went by. We had a sort of natural order of things that happened. We had tables in the dining room at Halley – they were in an L-shape – and these were made from the doors from the old garage in the old base. And we had what we called “Animals' Corner” and “Pseuds' Corner”. Animals' Corner was where the mechanics sat, with all their dirty fingers and greasy fingers, and Pseuds' Corner was where the rest of them sat. So there was quite a lot of banter between the two, good-natured banter. Everybody had their own little seat.. I hovered between the two, to keep the balance, but there was really very good-natured ...

[Part 2 0:33:22] Lee: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Lax: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[Part 2 0:33:58] Lee: Was it a lonely life, being a base leader?

Lax: No, I didn't feel that. I didn't feel I was out of anything. They could always come to me. We had another guy, Phil Hart, a Met man, who was very keen on the dogs and he ran the dogs a lot. Not very good with machinery. He and the electrician went down on the sea ice one evening with the skidoos to see the penguins, and because Phil wasn't very skilful with skidoos, he lost it down an ice crack, and it sank to the bottom of the sea. He came and he woke me up and said 'Er, I have just lost the skidoo on the sea ice.' I said 'Are you OK? There is nothing wrong?' He said 'No no, we are fine.' I said 'Well that's OK. We will talk about it tomorrow.' I never told him off or anything, I just reported that we had lost it on the sea ice and that was that. Luckily it wasn't one of the ones destined for the Shackletons, because they were kept sacrosanct. It was one of the other ones and there was no fuss about it. They felt they could just come and tell me and we just dealt with it.

[Part 2 0:35:14] Lee: Had it gone through thin ice?

Lax: Yes. The ice was shifting and there was a slight tide crack with a thin covering of ice. Well if you get the speed right and you don't stop, you can normally get across, but he stopped and it sank so he leapt off and that was that. I was glad he was all right.

[Part 2 0:35:34] Lee: There are some anecdotes I need to ask you about.

Lax: Oh crikey! You have been doing some homework, have you?

[Part 2 0:35:40] Lee: Well no; very kindly you sent me some notes. We have dealt with some already but in 1974 (this is like gobbledegook): 'LP *Twa' bra' lads* go missing.'

Lax: Oh right, yes.

[Part 2 0:35:54] Lee: What on earth were you talking about?

Lax: Right. We had a collection of records at Halley Bay, LPs, and they were all kept in little shelves. The rule was: whoever put a record on, it stayed on. You never took anybody else's record off because that way lies anarchy. So when the record was on, until it was finished, it was left. When you were assistant cook, you were allowed to put the record on that played during the meal, because they had a little speaker going into the dining area. Well one of the worst records we had was two Scottish folk singers, Andy MacKay and Sandy MacKay, and they were known as the *Twa' Bra' Lads*. It used to start off [sings]: 'I'm Andy MacKay and I'm Sandy MacKay, two bonny lads are we ...' and it went downhill from there. It was absolutely awful. Well this used to come out when the assistant cook wanted people to move away so we could clear up and ...

[Part 2 0:36:53] Lee: Oh right? OK.

Lax: And I was one of the most vociferous complainants about this record and the builder was one of the people who liked it most of all. Well the record went missing and the finger of blame pointed at me, and no matter how much I protested my innocence, they all believed until the day they left base that I was the one that did it. I didn't. I thought no more of it until I went back to Halley in '77 (this was in '74). When I went back in '77, it was time to renew the lino in the lounge area and by the bar we had an old 5-gallon drum that had been painted up and cleaned, which was a rubbish bin, which used to stand at the end of the bar, and people would put their cans in and the rubbish. When you looked at it, there was a ring underneath that this 5-gallon drum had made like a cup mark, a hot cup on a table. But when we pulled the lino up, there was this LP. So I told everybody the tale about it and everyone had a good laugh about it. I said 'Well play it.' So we played it and it disappeared again. [Laughs] I don't know who took it this time but it certainly wasn't me. There are few times in your life when you can say 'I am totally innocent of this.' but I was totally innocent of that and I got the blame for it, well and truly. But I was exonerated in the end. To this day I don't know who put it under there.

[Part 2 0:38:23] Lee: Was that the only record playing problem on base?

Lax: No. Pretty well people respected the rules because you knew if you did it, then somebody else would do it to you. The rule still prevailed about the assistant cook. I used to put on Paul Robeson; that used to get them out fairly quickly, and Leonard Cohen was always a good shifter as well.

[Part 2 0:38:48] Lee: Not in the Antarctic, surely? In 1975 you found there was an iceberg, an overturned iceberg with some rocks on.

Lax: Oh yes, that was quite exciting, that.

[Part 2 0:38:58] Lee: That surprised me enormously.

Lax: I was down on the sea ice. Very often there are icebergs turned over and trapped in the ice and I saw this one, and it was a lovely colour, and when we looked closer there were some rock and some sediment in it, which was the first rock we had seen for two years. So we collected it in some plastic bags and kept it for 'Rocky' Clarkson (Pete Clarkson) to have a look at. He eventually did analyse them and wrote a paper, put them in a paper that showed where the iceberg had travelled from. It had come down some glacier or other, probably originally from the Shackletons, and come all the way down, and gathered this stuff up on its way. So it was quite an interesting find but ironically it hit the base at a time when there wasn't a geologist on base. Prior to that we had always had geologists⁸. Yes that was quite a surprise.

[Part 2 0:40:02] Lee: A darts match, on the radio, in 1975. Radio darts is a fairly common sport in the Antarctic. Who were you playing against?

Lax: We played Sanae, the South African base. We used to have regular scheds with them. I did an ionospheric experiment with them. We had a regular schedule and we skipped on various frequencies to try and see what was going on, and I kept a record of them and gave them to Roy Piggott who incorporated them in some of his research, so it was excellent research. Because of that we became quite close on the air. We used to send them our newsletter and they used to send us theirs, but theirs used to alternate between Afrikaans and English. But luckily we had Eric Harvey on base who was a South African and he used to translate the Afrikaans for us. But yes, we played darts over the radio with them.

[Part 2 0:41:04] Lee: Now did you ever cheat, because there is one story about a base that was playing darts on the radio all winter without the benefit of a dartboard?

Lax: No no, we didn't cheat. In fact at one stage, the way it was organised was: the dartboard was in the radio room and the operating position was here where I was sitting communicating the results, but it was right in the path of the darts, and when they bounced off I was in severe danger. So I ended up sitting there wearing a hardhat. But there was plenty of booze going round. Everybody was very jolly but we didn't cheat.

[Part 2 0:41:39] Lee: Were you back on the bottle by then?

⁸ The last wintering geologist was Peter Clarkson in 1969.

Lax: Yes. Well you make it sound like I was an alcoholic, but I was drinking then. When I went back the next time I drank. I stopped when I came back. I started to drink on the way home because during the first winter I had skied over to the IGY base with the dogs and I had gone down in the IGY base just to have a look round and I saw, sticking up out of the ice in the loft, the neck of a bottle with some rattan round it. I thought 'I wonder what that was.' When I looked and it was a complete demijohn of Navy Neaters rum, virgin, still with the cork in. Well I was teetotal at that time so I took it back to base and when the ship came it I went to see Big Trev the bosun, who I had become very friendly with. I said 'Trev, I have found this in the old base and I want you to look after it for me.' He said 'Oh, fairy gold!' He had a little sip and then when I came out a year later he was on the ship still. We sailed and I didn't have a drink. People kept saying 'Go on. You have proved your point. Have a drink.' I said 'No I don't want a drink.' 'Go on, have a drink.' 'No no no.' because I had been 2½ years routinely refusing. Eventually I said 'Look, if it will keep you quiet, I will have a drink.' Well it was like I had never stopped. I woke up with a terrible hangover and said 'That's it, Never again.' Then I drank again and then I more or less stopped for several years after that. But it was like I'd never stopped when I started again. You would think with the 2½ years you would have changed, but I hadn't. Then I drank moderately ever since. I don't drink much now.

[Part 2 0:43:42] Lee: Tell me about this limerick competition in '75.

Lax: There was a limerick competition set by the radio officer on the *Bransfield* and there was a prize for whoever got the best completion line. The limerick was:

There was a young girl called Amanda,
Not a teddy but more like a panda.
And in bed every night,
When Mum turned out the light,

...

You had to complete this line. Well Amanda was a little girl who worked at Port Stanley on the telexes. She was quite well-known to the radio operating fraternity. So we opened up this limerick competition to the South Africans who came up with some very bawdy ones which we duly passed on. The lines were 'So I slipped her the old salamander.' 'So I rammed her and rammed her and rammed her.' and they got worse and worse and worse and eventually Eric Harvey our doctor won it with 'I wished t'was the real bare Amanda.' And that seemed about the best, so Eric won, I think it was a big panda or something.

[Part 2 0:44:57] Lee: Did the Amanda in the Falklands ever get to hear it?

Lax: Well I would think so. She had a foul mouth on her. All of the Falkland Island girls did. I remember Sir Granville Beynon came down during one relief, and we were setting up a new telex link with Stanley. We used send a test text with a fixed number of words, so you would send the text and you would say 'Word count: 95.' Then she would look at the text and count the words, and then she said, as Sir Granville was looking over, 'I don't agree with your words.' and instead of saying 'count' she missed a letter out, and of course Sir Granville nearly collapsed in apoplexy, and then she came back 'Oh shit', she said 'I didn't mean that; I meant count.' And they were all like that, all the time. They were very foul-mouthed but poor old Sir Granville, he nearly had a heart attack I think, at the language coming over the air.

[Part 2 0:46:01] Lee: In your year as base leader, in '77, you had some work done on the toilets and the bathroom.

Lax: Oh yes. That was quite revolutionary really, because the toilets at Halley are something that comes up at every reunion, every Halley Bay reunion, and they were basically very large holes dug in the ice, and then they put a 45-gallon drum over the top, with the top and the bottom cut out, and a tailor-made seat to sit on. Everything just went down into this pit and froze solid, but it didn't freeze uniformly, because it was obviously frozen before the excrement hit the bottom. So it used to form into a stalagmite, which was known as a 'turdicle', and periodically somebody had to abseil down there and hack the turdicle down, which was not a very nice job, and not one for which there were a lot of volunteers, I can tell you. But anyway I decided that there had to be a better way to do this, having had this for two years. What we did was: we had some Elsan fluid in the stores there, so we mixed Elsan fluid with avtur, as an antifreeze, and we put it in the bottom of a 45-gallon drum, and we built some new stalls in a shaft near the genny shed, with very nice seats on them and a little step to get up.

[Part 2 0:47:35] Lax: Then everything fell into the Elsan, just like a normal chemical toilet, and then we put a polythene sheet over the top, and Pete Witty had made a bracket that you could screw up to hold it all tightly. Then we would lift it out of the base and take it away and deposit it, a much more hygienic and a much more pleasant experience. Unfortunately it meant that you had to chisel off the lids of two drums each week, which was quite hard work with a hammer and chisel, but anyway we did it and we always used an avtur drum for this. But one day, some bright spark used a petrol drum, because the ratio of petrol to avtur was huge. We had relatively little need for petrol but we had a huge need for avtur. They chiselled this off, down it went into position and the Elsan went in and the avtur went in, and the first person to use that trap was Bunny Houlcroft, the tractor mechanic. He was a heavy smoker; he was smoking his cigarette and he dropped it into the toilet. Unfortunately there were still enough petrol fumes to ignite. So he burned his bottom and his 'family jewels', cursed everybody roundly, and we had to make sure for ever after that we only used avtur drums.

[Part 2 0:49:03] Lee: What was his first name?

Lax: Michael, Michael Houlcroft. He was known as Bunny.

[Part 2 0:49:08] Lee: And the bathroom, the bathing facilities had some renovation, restoration and repairs?

Lax: Oh gosh, yes. That was a saga. The bathroom was at the beginning of the accommodation block, where all the pits were, and it started to sink, and to level it off was quite a big job. We had to take all the shower out and so on. We only showered once a week, or once every fortnight probably. When it was your turn to be on gash, you were entitled to have a free shower. If you wanted to shower in between time, you had to ask permission from the gashman and put the snow in to do the water. Most people didn't do that; they just waited until it was time for gash. Well what we had to do was make a temporary shower arrangement while that was out of action. So Pete

Witty built this splendid shower in the generating shed, in a shaft, and we had all the heat from the generators to melt the snow, and a 45-gallon drum. He fixed it so that the water came out and drained away. An excellent piece of work. The down side of it was that when people wanted to get dry, they would stand in front of the generator because it was blowing out all the warm air. Everybody had frizzy hairstyles because we all had fairly long hair, but the worst part came a little later on. We had a programme to dry everybody's sleeping bags out because they just got filled with condensation and perspiration, and the cook, who was this liverish guy called Jim Oliver, who didn't get on with Pete Witty either, asked if he could dry his sleeping bag in the genny shed. So Pete said yes; by this time he was resigned to people going in and out of his genny shed. We were just sitting down and all the lights went out. His sleeping bag had been dragged into the generator, so feathers everywhere and a very sheepish cook holding what was left of his sleeping bag. So that was the saga of the showers and the sleeping bag.

[Part 2 0:51:20] Lee: So the generator had eaten the sleeping bag effectively.

Lax: Yes, it had dragged it into the fan, because it was all open. It wasn't like the generators you see now.

[Part 2 0:51:30] Lee: It's a very isolated spot, Halley, but you were still getting some visits, weren't you?

Lax: We had very few visits, it's true, but more than ever in that year. We had one from the *Polarsirkel* which was a Norwegian research ship, which we renamed the 'polar furkle'. They entertained us on board and let everybody get fairly jolly and drunk. But I was forever disappointed because somebody from the *Polarsirkel* stole my coat, my winter coat, which was the one that Brian Jones had had, that saved his life, that he handed on to Kenn Back, that I got. And they stole it. I didn't notice until after they had gone, and I thought that was a pretty lowdown trick, to steal somebody's cold weather gear in the Antarctic. I thought that was pretty miserable. But yes, we had a visit from them and we had a visit from the Argentinian ship that was sunk, the *Belgrano*. She came to see us

[Part 2 0:52:32] Lee: Oh right? The cruiser? Battleship?

Lax: Yes, it was used as a training ship I think at that time. They came and entertained us and made a cake. We played football with them on the ice.

[Part 2 0:52:47] Lee: What were they doing in the Antarctic?

Lax: Well they have got quite a lot of Antarctic bases and they don't accept the claims that Britain has on the bases anyway. But it was a very pleasant visit; they were very nice and said 'Let's not talk about football.'

[Part 2 0:53:04] Lee: [laughs] Don't mention Maradona⁹?

⁹ Diego Maradona, an Argentine footballer.

Lax: We put their flag up, because Iain Levack was in charge of flags. We always had the Union Jack but when they came, he put their flag up. They came over and they looked at it and the commander said to me 'Why have you got the Italian flag up?' We said 'Oh we thought it was Argentinian.' He said 'No it isn't, it's Italian.' So that was that, but they were very pleasant and very nice to us, very kind.

[Part 2 0:53:32] Lee: When it came time to sail away, how were you feeling?

Lax: Well I half wanted to do another year. Part way through the year I did think about saying to them 'I will do another year.' but by then I had met Susie. We had met in between the trips and I thought 'Well no. Shall I? Shan't I? Shall I? Shan't I?' Then I thought 'You can't do this forever. It's good as it is. You can't do it forever.' (I know some Fids have managed to almost do it forever.) Therefore I left and I was very sad. I was very sad but the saddest part came probably with Pete Witty when he went back. He went back as base commander to Halley. He said to me 'I got all your old messages out and just did everything that you did.' I think he had a good year as well, but the saddest part was when he said he had killed the dog. He had had to put the dog down.

[Part 2 0:54:35] Lee: Any particular dog.

Lax: Muff. He put Muff down. Muff and Brae both went down, and I was very sad about that, as were many others of course. A lot of dogs were put down but it was very sad. But the end of an era really. It's a part of your life that will live with you forever, because it is a rare privilege and experience.

[Part 2 0:55:04] Lee: How does it rate then, not actually for marks out of ten, but ... You in particular, you came back from the Antarctic and you have not really stopped travelling since. We are doing this interview on a Sunday morning at your house because last week you were in Germany and next week you are in Scotland. How do those three Antarctic seasons rate in the life of a well-travelled man?

Lax: Ah I would think you couldn't even put them in the same category. I am what the Germans call a Weltbummler, you just bumble round the world, do your stuff and weave your scientific magic in various countries and they pay you for your services and you go away. But the Antarctic is a part of me really. I have some very vivid memories of certain events. Once I took the dogs down onto the sea ice. I was just skijoring. It was in my first winter, my first year, and it was towards the end of the winter and the sea was starting to melt, and as the sea was washing up onto the remaining ice, it built up like a little barrier, and the two dogs stopped there and they both climbed up this barrier. They put their feet up and just looked north. I just stood there and I thought 'Gosh, I will never forget this.' And there are other memories throughout the years which have been really good. I was sorry I never got to the Shackletons and I could have done, because when the Twin Otter was there, I asked him if he could take some of the lads out for a jolly, and there wasn't enough room for me to go. Some of us had to stay behind, so I stayed behind and I thought 'Well, serves you right for wanting it too much really.' But I don't have any regrets at all. I think it was marvellous. I am glad I didn't go when I was younger. I think I was just that little bit older than most of the Fids. I would have been 27, so it was a bit older than most of the Fids. Not older than Pete Witty and I think even Michael Houlcroft

was a bit older than I was. But I was mature enough to have seen lots of things and I had been in the Arctic quite a lot, so I knew quite a bit about that and I was very active and I had done a lot of climbing. And I was very competent within my own small sphere of radio and electronics, so that didn't hold any terrors for me.

[Part 2 0:57:41] Lee: I think you have not been back to the Antarctic since the '70s but you have organised this Halley reunion every other year.

Lax: Well that is only a Halley reunion for our year: for '77. We do that every other year, and we did a Halley 25th and a Halley 50th I think, and we are doing a 60th soon. So I have been on ...

[Part 2 0:58:06] Lee: What's the value of these reunions? Is it just old men reminiscing or is it more than that?

Lax: Pretty well just old men reminiscing. The difficulty is getting people together and it is awfully hard to get people together and if you just meet one or two people so you can go and visit them at their homes, as I have done, it is not the same as getting the whole group together. And it is hard not to live cheek by jowl with somebody in those circumstances, in some cases for two years, two and a half years ... I mean take John McClure: we sailed down together on the *Bransfield*, we spent two winters at Halley Bay, we came back together on the *Bransfield*, so we were two and a half years together. So we became very close, and it is nice to catch up on those companionships.

[Part 2 0:59:01] Lax: I have a different approach to being base commander than I know for example Dog Holden had, but I felt pastoral care for everybody who was there, and we still have that feeling of pastoral care amongst us, so when Geordie was very ill, the chippy, and eventually passed away, three or four of the lads went up to Newcastle to the funeral. And when Jack Temple passed away, we went to Jack's funeral as well, and if anybody is not well, they all get together and talk and phone them up if people suddenly go into hospital. So I am not saying it is like a band of brothers. It is not the kind of Masonic love and fraternity that you might have, but certainly there is an affection and a respect for each other over the years, and the people who we have lost touch with and who don't come to the reunion, are Pete Edwards, Dave Hogg, Jim Oliver, Andy Quinn. We can't seem to get hold of them. The rest all turn up. Some of them come over from Canada even. So I am about to start planning for next October's reunion for Halley Bay 1977. They said they liked the Shrewsbury thing very much but I see the Lion is up for sale so I don't know if that will still be there, but I might try and get that organised fairly soon. It doesn't take much organising really.

[Part 2 1:00:38] Lee: It has been an absolute pleasure, Ken. Thank you very much indeed.

Lax: Not at all, not at all. I hope in some future day, there will be somebody listening to this, thinking 'I wonder what it was like in the old days in the Antarctic, where we used to put the candles out with a hammer.'

[Part 2 1:00:58] [End of Part Two]

ENDS

Possible extracts:

- A brush with the Chinese Navy. [Part 1 0:10:02]
- Ella Woodfield: first woman at Halley Bay. [Part 1 0:26:50]
- Ice chipping and scrubouts. [Part 1 0:37:18]
- Brian Jones lost in a blizzard for a day and a half. [Part 1 0:40:40]
- Digging a dog kennel. [Part 1 0:48:24]
- Halley a great place. [Part 1 0:54:12]
- Radio Luxemburg picked up in the Hinge Zone. [Part 1 0:56:40]
- Iain Levack – another flying doctor. [Part 1 0:58:59]
- The most unpopular experiment on base. [Part 1 1:02:51]
- Moving the comms to the new base. [Part 2 0:00:10]
- Two styles of base commanding. [Part 2 0:09:50]
- Solidering (sic) on. [Part 2 0:19:27]
- Combining met and geophysics controversial. [Part 2 0:22:01]
- ████████████████████
- Pseudos' Corner and Animals' Corner. [Part 2 0:31:34]
- Loss of a skidoo through the sea ice. [Part 2 0:33:58]
- Andy MacKay and Sandy MacKay. [Part 2 0:35:54]
- A rocky iceberg. [Part 2 0:38:58]
- Limerick Completion. [Part 2 0:43:42]
- Amanda's language shocks Sir Granville. [Part 2 0:44:57]
- Consequences of using a petrol drum as a loo. [Part 2 0:47:35]
- The wrong flag. [Part 2 0:53:04]
- Reunions. [Part 2 0:57:41]