

LAWRENCE WILLEY

Edited transcript of a recording of Lawrence Willey interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 27th of October 2012. BAS Archives AD6/24/1/198 Transcribed by Andy Smith, 18th December 2018.

[0:00:00] Lee: Lawrence Willey, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 27th of October 2012.

Willey: Lawrence Edward Willey, born North Shields, Northumberland, 22 November 1943.

[0:00:16] Lee: So you are now sixty ...?

Willey: 68. I will be 69 in a couple of weeks.

[0:00:21] Lee: And you have a younger brother called Ian?

Willey: No, I have got an elder brother called Ian.

[0:00:27] Lee: Oh, Ian was ahead of you?

Willey: Yes. Not in FIDS terms.

[0:00:30] Lee: No you joined FIDS first, didn't you?

Willey: Yes. I had gone to university, did Geology, by chance ended up in the Antarctic. Ian was the explorer by attitude but he had become an electrical engineer. And I had done my year and he decided that he had better come South himself, and I didn't know about it. The first thing I knew about it was when the lists of who was going to be on what base, and Adelaide came out first, being A. It said Willey in Adelaide. So I sent an urgent message to London saying 'There is no way I am going to go to Adelaide. I can't do my sledging from Adelaide.' And the message came back: 'Willey is Willey's brother.'

[0:01:22] Lee: And that's how you found out?

Willey: Yep.

[0:01:26] Lee: How did you feel about it?

Willey: Oh, quite pleased.

[0:01:29] Lee: You didn't think he was being cheeky?

Willey: No no. I am glad he wasn't on my base, because I was always the kid. He always pulled me out of the scrapes. We were talking about it going up towards Langdale. He was in the Scouts and I was in the Cubs. They went off to Patterdale and they took me along as his brother and they dragged me up Helvellyn when I was only about ten, so literally dragged me.

[0:02:06] Lee: You went to the Antarctic as a geologist in '66 and you were detailed to go to Stonington base. Was that by choice or were you just sent there?

Willey: No no. You are sent. Presumably someone has told you: we went under sealed orders.

[0:02:25] Lee: No, go on.

Willey: Oh, we knew where we were going, but Adie insisted that the Captain of the boat you were on would hand you your instructions outside the territorial waters.

[0:02:43] Lee: What was the thinking behind that?

Willey: Ex-Navy tradition. Top Secret blah blah blah.

[0:02:53] Lee: It wasn't because you couldn't argue at that point?

Willey: Well there was Graham Smith and I went down to Stonington that year and we were given 'Geologise south of 71 South.' So it was fairly detailed instructions. He was an Aberdeen man and I had done palaeontology as my principal geology studies, so he took the mainland and I took Alexander Island. There was no argument about it. We were both very happy.

[0:03:23] Lee: So you were working out of Stonington but your study area was Alexander Island?

Willey: Yes.

[0:03:27] Lee: And that would require crossing by sea ice?

Willey: Three choices. You could have gone onto the Peninsula, down the Peninsula, down one of the glaciers to Alexander Island. You could have waited for the aircraft but as we had wiped off the aircraft pretty well as I went in, and there was a new aircraft coming the following year but it was going to be late in the season. Or we could go across the sea ice. So I opted for the sea ice.

[0:04:02] Lee: So does that mean you were camped on ice on Alexander Island for most of the geology season?

Willey: Most of the working season, until the boat came back and then unfortunately that year the GAs which Graham and I both had were going home, and as the boat was already happening on Alexander Island or in the Sound, I opted to go and GA for Graham on the Peninsula. And there was work. I didn't mind. Graham's good company, so we enjoyed ourselves.

[0:04:38] Lee: You travelled everywhere with dog teams I guess?

Willey: Yes. I sledged down with ... I borrowed one of the surveyors' dog teams because the aircraft was going to be limited in its capabilities. Four of us sledged in

with a team each and I was given a team for the trip, which was a bit hair-raising but interesting. And then I handed over to a surveyor when I got to the Bluff, and for the rest of the season there was George McLeod and I with one team, the Terrors, which was quite adequate for the work we were doing.

[0:05:15] Lee: What were you finding?

Willey: Basically it's sedimentary and fossils. We were lucky in ... there was at that time a lot of the work on continental drift was still fresh and I was the sort of the junior of the three: Taylor, Thomson and Willey who put together the fossil links to South America, India, Australia and so forth. So we were very lucky at the timing we were there.

[0:05:50] Lee: Was part of the instruction the general principle, to try and back up Adie's theory that ...?

Willey: No no, we were just sent down to find out what was there. We knew a bit of what Adie and before that BGLE ... They had brought out a couple of small specimens of bone bags and things, and again, "Tal" had taken the minutia (Tal Taylor); he was a very good geologist but he was interested in odd things like what crawled on the back of something, rather than the something itself. Mike Thomson was the ammonite man and I was left initially with belemnites and other molluscs, which suited me quite well.

[0:06:38] Lee: But by the mid-sixties, when you were doing your geology, the concept of continental drift, was that relatively well established by then, or was it still up in the air?

Willey: No, the concept was well established, but the evidence ...

[0:06:52] Lee: Documentary evidence?

Willey: ... wasn't there, the fossil evidence wasn't there and that's what we were able to put together, and Antarctica proved to be a key for linking the other continents together. So we were very fortunate at that time that ...

[0:07:09] Lee: The right geologists in the right place at the right time?

Willey: Yes.

[0:07:10] Lee: Was it exciting, making those kind of significant strides?

Willey: Yes. Working with those two guys, I was so lucky. Tal had been back ... He went down '61 I think, and Mike Thomson was already home when I went down, so they were well into their ideas before I got back. And then I just got picked up and carried along with the tidal flow, so I was the junior, but got my name on the paper.

Lee: Tell me about that first ... because I think there were two journeys down to

Fossil Bluff, wasn't there? – one that was relatively trouble-free. So let's talk about that one first.

Willey: Relatively trouble free, but the sledging diary I have got: our first night away from Stonington, which was Red Rock Ridge, just round the corner, we had a duff primus. We didn't realise at the time but George McLeod went out early the following morning to go to the toilet, and collapsed. He had carbon monoxide poisoning.

[0:08:27] Lee: I see.

Willey: Yes, because reading what I have written there, we were very lucky. Over the next day we were recovering. Fortunately we had a spare primus with us, so the rest of the trip was OK. But sledging on sea ice is not sledging on a flat carpet. It took us a month, and we had some pretty bad weather. We didn't have the hair raising experiences of the following year but we each had turn overs and on account of this George and Ali¹ injured their shoulders and I strained a leg, and I said (one of my comments is here) 'Antarctica, where are the fit guys? We are the invalids.' We ended up shooting one dog. One of George's dogs collapsed and we couldn't take him on so we shot him, or George shot him, which was like shooting one of your children. George loved his dogs.

[0:09:44] Willey: The purpose of our trip was: because of this new aircraft coming down, we had been asked to sit at the Puffballs, just in case there was a problem with the aircraft. So we laid out an airstrip for him but he never used it because of the timing and so forth, but that's why we went out early, and just to sit there and be his backup in case there was ... because there was no-one at the Bluff at that stage. If he'd had to land, as it proved the following year with Ian's aircraft, the Bluff weather and Adelaide (not Stonington) weather are completely different, and you can get lost quite quickly. So there we were just to give him a backup. And then we got down.

[0:10:35] Lee: You followed him then down to Fossil Bluff?

Willey: He had got in to Fossil Bluff. He'd flown, he did his first trip into Fossil Bluff, put people in and we'd just motored on. Just for a sledger, it was an interesting journey.

[0:10:53] Lee: Did that first season of geology work go fairly smoothly?

Willey: In terms of geology, not particularly. I think I got about twenty days actually geologising, out of a whole season, whereas when I went back in '72, we had perfect weather. It was Mike Thomson, Mike Bell, and Chris Edwards, and we worked and worked and worked, 24 hours sunlight, so we were working twenty plus hours a day. Then we started praying for bad weather because it was just too good. But that first year, no, as I say we didn't get that many good days to work. Enough to get data to take home but not particularly satisfactory in terms of geology.

[0:11:53] Lee: Did you swap partners as well at some point? You went to help George on the Peninsula, didn't you? And then there was some sort of accident I believe.

¹ Alastair McArthur.

Willey: No, George went home and I went up and joined Graham Smith on the Peninsula and things were going very well because on the Peninsula the snow was in good condition. There was no melt up there. One day we had been climbing and we came down a final wind scoop and being young idiots, no sorry good Fids, we decided we would arseade down the winds coop.

[0:12:28] Lee: I beg your pardon?

Willey: Sit on your backside and sort of sledge down like snow and you just sit down and slide. And a winds coop is ... it's like a helter-skelter. It's got a big curve in it and it was such good fun the first time that we went back for another and I went a bit too fast and went over the edge and landed head first on the moraine and was knocked out. And Graham came down and found me, dragged me onto the sledge, took me back to the tent, did a bit of first aid, called base and the next day they decided to evacuate me out, which they did.

[0:13:14] Lee: By air?

Willey: By air, yes, and then when we went back to get Graham and the Fossil Bluff guys, that was when the Pilatus Porter was lost because they hit sastrugi, broke the ski. He took the ski off and tried to take off, just the pilot on his own, on wheels, and he managed to turn the plane over and bent it a bit. Like bent it so much it was never used again. And that's how they ended up wintering at the Bluff. Fortunately ... I had intended to winter myself so they had stocked the place up for me to winter, but they ended up with five guys instead of ... There were only four bunks for the Bluff, so they had some privations, and that was partly why the next year we tried to sledge in early to ... They wanted them relieved, just in case there were problems, and then Cape Jeremy came up.

[0:12:45] Lee: What happened to your injuries?

Willey: Oh a bit of concussion, gashed head. I seem to fall on my head quite regularly. Basically I could have stayed in the field if London hadn't suggested I should be ... They wanted me out and possibly on the boat, but I was OK.

[0:14:51] Lee: So you only got as far as Stonington?

Willey: Yes.

[0:14:53] Lee: By plane?

Willey: Yes.

[0:14:55] Lee: And then there was a recovery of sorts?

Willey: There was a doctor there and he had a look at me and decided the brain wasn't all that much use anyhow.

[0:15:07] Lee: Well the second year, when you went back to Fossil Bluff, that was the year that became known as the Cape Jeremy Affair, and I wonder whether you would be kind enough to talk me through it?

Willey: Right. Although we intended to get off early, the sea ice hadn't been good in forming. It had formed and gone out, and formed and gone out. So the previous year we'd ... (I'm looking at my book here) we'd actually set off end of August/ beginning of September. The second year we didn't get away until mid to late September. The conditions were reasonable to start and then the weather started deteriorating and we ran into deep soft and so forth. But the worst thing was that we got down towards Puffballs/ Cape Jeremy when the sea ice broke up and started drifting towards Australia. And basically we tried for several days to get off but by that time we had been out and been on half rations for probably a week to two weeks by that stage, and there was just water. So we camped. It was four of us again but only three dog teams this time. Ali McArthur was the Base Leader, Flavell Smith who was the geophysicist and Shaun Norman who was also a GA. So we had two experienced climbers and so forth. Ali had done the trip the previous year, so he knew what way we were going. And myself. We had read the reports from previous ... the Horseshoe event when they lost the guys.

[0:17:08] Lee: Yes, in the mid-fifties.

Willey: Some of the dogs got home but they didn't have harnesses on, so we worked out that when you are in that sort of situation, and you are not going to get out, and that's what we decided: we probably wouldn't, one night we released the dogs. And the next morning we woke up, outside, and there were the dogs sitting around the tent looking inwards. So they had obviously tried and they couldn't get off.

[0:17:39] Lee: Sorry, I am not quite clear what happened. You had cut the dogs' traces, had you?

Willey: We released them. No, we literally took the harnesses off and released them.

[0:17:48] Lee: And they didn't go?

Willey: And said 'Go home; if you can, go.' But there was too much water. They couldn't get off the floe we were on. Our floe was getting smaller because there was this iceberg that kept hitting us and breaking bits off. So we started off a football pitch sort of size and slowly got less and less. One morning Flavell and I were in one tent; we decided that we would have a good breakfast for our last day if it came to that, and we saved a few biscuits and some jam in our food box. And we woke up one morning and there was six inches of water in the tent, and the jam and the biscuits were no longer edible. Twenty four hours later a complete change. The temperature went down like zero. There was a film of sea ice formed and we skated across that as if we were jet propelled, and the Stonington party had come south and we met them about 40 miles north of where we were, and went home. That was it.

[0:19:05] Lee: Well that wasn't quite it because it was a bit hairier than I think you are indicating. Let's just go back a little bit and talk about the first indications you had

that there was a problem. What were the tell-tale signs that the sea ice was not behaving itself as you thought it would do?

Willey: Well the temperatures went up. Previous years, and again I am looking at my log book here, we were experiencing temperatures –15 to –20. This year they were round the zero mark and that is not good for sledging. It's too soft. You are sinking into the stuff and just not pleasant; you were getting wet.

[0:19:51] Lee: So you were already penetrating the surface of the ice as you went along?

Willey: The snow, yes. The snow on top of the sea ice was soggy and not very ... difficult to travel with. The dogs weren't enjoying it; we weren't enjoying it. Anyway, using extra paraffin to dry out in the evenings, which we shouldn't have been doing. We only set off with thirty days food and paraffin and although we could pick up some, you don't have a great deal of spare capacity. Obviously somebody has told you something which I have forgotten about.

[0:20:33] Lee: No. I have read the account in the book, in Fuchs's *Of Ice and Men*, but I am just trying to get your ... the process as you saw it with your own eyes. So you began to realise the ice was not behaving properly and it was ...

Willey: We started getting into broken area but we continued south because we could make our way between them. There was one night we were travelling and we spotted a seal. So we set up camp and I am trying to remember who went off. It wasn't me because I was left in camp. I think it was Flavell and I were left with the tents and Ali and Shaun went off to kill the seal. And then it manded in. The weather went bad on us and I was out with a torch, flashing a torch, trying to ... It was no use going anywhere. I think we probably put a rope on me and I went as far as I could, to try and guide the guys back. Fortunately they made it but probably the dogs could smell us and they came to us rather than any of the humans having enough ability to navigate themselves back. That night the pressure ice hit us and the flat ice behind us that night, we ended up with a 14 foot pressure ridge and I think we might have had to move tent quite rapidly because of it.

[0:22:20] Willey: But we were also getting leads and I have got a photograph at home where it's a lead probably 14/ 15 foot but it's just slush. Snow on water and we spent most of the day ... You can ski across that sort of stuff if you are quick. The dogs all run across it; they might get a bit wet, and if the sledge is pulled across, one box at a time ... So we got one guy across with a rope, attached the rope to a sledge, one box across, sledge back, second box across, and you just ferry the stuff back and forward onto the next floe. And we proceeded like that for a while. Because I didn't have a dog team, my task to a large extent was to go out and try and find a route. Sometimes we got further; sometimes we didn't make very much progress.

[0:23:30] Lee: And all the time this football pitch sized piece of ice that you were on, was that floating further out to sea?

Willey: No no. We weren't onto that bit at that stage. We were still making two or three miles a day but we were crossing cracks and new pressure ice and different

cracks. It was only after then that we came to a big lead, stopped at that, then turned back to retrace our steps. But the lead behind us had opened up, so instead of a 14 foot passable stretch, there was open water again. And then we found ourselves on that football pitch.

[0:24:03] Lee: Did you think you were a goner?

Willey: Oh yes, eventually.

[0:24:07] Lee: Did it occur to you that you might have that stroke of luck?

Willey: We could always hope but we were pretty pragmatic about it. That's why we let the dogs off.

[0:24:21] Lee: Yes, and you had obviously heard the story of the previous decade.

Willey: We had read, as you are supposed to do, you read the sledge reports and you identify the risks. I mean we were ... If we had followed the rule book – even in those days there was a rule book ... You are supposed to camp on an island every night. Well if you have ever had the opportunity to do that trip, it was impossible to do that but the rule book said you had to. So we were breaking the rules. But to work in the Antarctic in those days, you could never work and keep the rule book. The rule book was there because even in those days, the Survey realised that it didn't want to be liable for what idiots like the geologists did to do the work. So we had no gripes about it. We knew what we were doing.

[0:25:19] Lee: Right.

Willey: And we went out and did it, and the risks were there. We knew what the risks were. We were young, foolhardy and we were enjoying ourselves.

[0:25:31] Lee: What about the first communication with anybody that you were in trouble? You had a radio with you?

Willey: We had a radio. We kept up regular scheds with base because obviously, with our job being set up, to get into the Bluff to relieve the guys, we needed to know how things were and so forth, and whether the aircraft was going to turn up, because in those days, you never knew when the aircraft would turn up. But our idea was to get in there before the aircraft and just cheer them up a bit. So every night we'd have a radio sched and most nights we could get through. Really communications in those days were a bit hit and miss –ey. I don't know if they have said to you: the rule was that if you were out of communication for a month, you would inform London. And if it was two months, they would get worried.

[0:26:31] Lee: But you talked to London, didn't you?

Willey: Not direct, no. We sent messages to London.

[0:26:38] Lee: Via Stanley?

Willey: No. We would send a message to Stonington and Stonington relayed to Stanley, Stanley to London, and the reverse back.

[0:26:48] Lee: Were you getting anything useful from HQ?

Willey: Simply, no, and I am very honest with you. If you read the telexes, I think at one stage Fuchs suggested that ... One of our questions to him was: because we were drifting and at that stage they had just got these new satellite photographs, it was satellites up there, and we thought, perhaps naively, that Fuchs could get in touch with a friend in America who would have a look at the satellite and be able to see where we were going. So we asked them 'What's happening?' And Fuchs' answer was that if we climbed onto Cape Jeremy, we would see what was happening. So you can imagine what our comments about that were. And also we got one which we shouldn't have got, which was Fuchs's message to Stonington, that there was to be no rescue, which ...

[0:27:52] Lee: You got that?

Willey: We got it. We shouldn't have got it, but I think it came over in Morse and we heard it, which was logic, because the guys at base had no better equipment than us, The boat wasn't the sort of thing you would want to go to sea in. It was purely the right instruction, because those guys would have risked their lives just to have a go, to get us out. And Fuchs was right. 'There's no aircraft in the area; there's no ships in the area and you are forbidden to attempt a rescue.' We couldn't complain about that.

[0:28:40] Lee: No. The last time it happened in the fifties, of course that instruction was ignored, by base commanders. Peter Gibbs and Paisley did do a search.

Willey: Yep, and our guys set off as well. But the instructions were right, and we were very pleased when we met them.

[0:29:04] Lee: I bet you were.

Willey: Because they had food.

[0:29:07] Lee: So what was the psychology like on board this diminishing iceberg, then, this ice floe? Were you ...?

Willey: It was quite good. Because we had accepted our fate to some extent, but we weren't giving up. I mean the day we got off, we shouldn't have gone on the ice we went onto but we thought there was a chance and we thought 'Well let's take the chance.' And if we didn't make it, we didn't make it, but it wasn't going to be any worse than where we were. We probably only had a couple of days left on that floe anyhow. So basically the guys were good.

[0:29:51] Lee: So there was no infighting?

Willey: No, not fighting. The tents were separate: Flavell and I in one tent; and Ali and Shaun in the other, so they were separate in that because we were separate geographically, we camped together, we put our tent up and we did our cooking and

that sort of thing, and they did their thing. So there was occasionally sort of queries whether the other tent was using more paraffin than they should for drying clothes and that sort of thing, but that's just normal sledging. But we got on very well; we still do.

[0:30:30] Lee: Did you consult your Maker?

Willey: I did. I am not a strong church-goer but I do have a faith and yes, I did.

[0:30:44] Lee: So when the wind veered round and started blowing you back to land again, was that a ...?

Willey: I thought He had made a big mistake.

[0:30:53] Lee: Tell me about that period of time when you began to realise that maybe the wind had turned around and you were going to be OK.

Willey: That was a very short period, literally overnight. Within 24 hours we were pretty well towards the end, and the next morning suddenly there was that freeze up. And one night's freezing sea ice does not give you much ice, but there was ice, which was more than we'd had before, and we just ran, literally.

[0:31:30] Lee: So you took a risk even then?

Willey: Oh a big risk, yes, but we wanted a chance and that was our chance and we took it.

[0:31:39] Lee: Was that a majority decision or a unanimous verdict?

Willey: We didn't even discuss it. We just all knew what we had to do: get the dogs, harness them, put everything on the sledge, get the tent down and go.

[0:31:54] Lee: Did you tell Stonington you were doing that?

Willey: No, I don't think we had a sched at that time, because the previous night we probably didn't know we were going to do it, so we just ran. And we knew where they were and we just headed in that direction and I don't think we stopped until we got to them.

[0:32:17] Lee: How was that feeling, when you ...?

Willey: A great pleasure.

[0:32:24] Lee: Was there a party?

Willey: There was definitely a party. There was no alcohol but there was a party. We were hungry.

[0:32:29] Lee: I bet you were, yes.

Willey: And they had food. That was a good feeling.

[0:32:37] Lee: Did it cloud your view of your Antarctic experiences, that you had been so close to not coming back?

Willey: No no. I look with great fondness to my Antarctic time.

[0:32:50] Lee: OK. You had some other hairy moments as well, didn't you, one in particular on Signy Island?

Willey: Oh that, yes. We all should learn about crevasse rescue, said our mentors on the way South, and when we got to Signy, Malcolm, who was the First Officer, decided that he would take us over the island and give us a bit of practice. And it was all set up properly: safety harnesses, ice axes with ropes and everything, and some of the guys went to the edge, jumped over and came out no problem. My turn came and I went to the edge and they said 'Jump'. So I jumped, I fell and I fell but I was relaxed. That was the main thing: I was relaxed, and I ended up on a snow bridge. And I was so lucky that had I gone a yard that side or a yard that side I would have kept on falling. Fortunately I was within rope length of a new rope, but hit this bridge.

[0:34:03] Lee: So what happened to your ropes?

Willey: They came down and joined me. That's how I found out that something had gone wrong, because there was this rope all sort of collapsed onto me. Apparently, and I only say this because everybody else tells me, that my reaction was to shout up 'Send a camera down' which I don't think they did. They sent a rope down eventually. It took a while, but I got out, and we went home, went back to the ship. There was no more practice that day.

[0:34:38] Lee: So that was another lucky escape was it?

Willey: Very lucky, yes, and I could have just gone. I couldn't see the bottom.

[0:34:48] Lee: There was an incident on the Northeast Glacier with you and Shaun Norman, when again the ropes didn't do what they were supposed to do.

Willey: Yes, there was a ... I had just got back and it had been decided that I could stay on base, and Shaun had come in as a new GA. In the autumn we do a lot of depot laying for the next season and also the new people learn how to run their dogs, And Shaun was given a dog team and he did learn how to run his dogs, and he was a professional climber and he wanted to climb mountains. So he suggested it would be a good idea for him to practice with his dogs, do a little depot laying for the people going up Sodabread, and at the same time we do a slight diversion on the way back and climb a peak. And off we went and had a good day except on the way up I caused Shaun's wrath because I spotted an avalanche somewhere off to our right and walked further to the left so I could take a photograph of Shaun and the avalanche. Shaun, as a professional mountaineer, suggested that if I wanted to play silly whatever it was, that at that time of day it was avalanche time and we had to get off where we were onto rock.

[0:36:17] Willey: Anyhow we went up, got on the top and the weather changed a bit and the wind came up and somehow Shaun lost his gloves which was bad for Shaun. I had mine but he only had one pair of gloves. But again, being a professional, he said no problem, he would get me down all right. That was almost a good thing about me in the Antarctic. I'm not a good climber but if I'm with a professional, I would go anywhere because they drag me up and they bring me down. Coming down there was a big ice wall and Shaun decided to belay me down it because to get any other way was going to be a big detour. And so I go over the edge, going down using crampons and ice axes to climb down. And I must have got about halfway when the wall itself peeled off and I went with it and I fell but unfortunately the belay and probably Shaun's frozen fingers resulted in him falling as well. Now we were up probably about 5000 feet at this point and we ended up down at the glacier level eventually, and we just fell and bounced and rolled and bounced and fell. And apart from a few bruises, it was the quickest way down the mountain I've ever found.

[0:37:48] Lee: This was on snow?

Willey: No no we went over rock.

[0:37:52] Lee: Oh really?

Willey: We looked back and we could see the gully we had started in and we ended up in a different gully, so somewhere along the line, we had crossed over between gullies. We were very lucky.

[0:38:09] Lee: So this Almighty that you'd had a word with previously, was He looking after you?

Willey: I can only think so. I mean I've never had any personal communications but ...

[0:38:24] Lee: OK.

Willey: I think fools survive. It's the clever people who ...

[0:38:33] Lee: On the way down, as a new Fid, you went to the traditional party at Government House on Stanley?

Willey: Yes.

[0:38:41] Lee: And your etiquette was lacking at one point?

Willey: I'm afraid so. As a young man I was teetotal but college life and then early time on the boat, I got a taste for whisky for some reason. But I'd been told that Lady Haskard had a limited budget and in order to not waste it on Fids, things were watered. So I thought 'I will be fair. I won't have a lot. I will just have one drink.' So I got hold of the butler and said 'Give me one straight whisky and I won't ask for another one.' And off he trotted but by that time I was in conversation with Lady Haskard and a couple of other guys, and the butler returned and in a loud voice told

me 'There's your whisky Sir, and there's no water in it.' But she took it in very good manner and she didn't even blink, and she was very good to the Fids.

[0:39:48] Lee: Was she a kind of mother figure?

Willey: Yes, she had a ... You've seen Government House?

[0:38:41] Lee: I've seen photographs, yes.

Willey: They've got gardens and things and she grew vegetables and every year she put a sack of cabbages and cauliflowers, whatever she was growing, and each base got their delivery from her. So she was good; she was different.

[0:40:16] Lee: Different?

Willey: Oh very strong upper class accent and obviously (I think you would call it) upper drawer parentage and so forth, whereas we lads were a bit sort of ... As I said, a minister would have a word for us.

[0:40:38] Lee: A government minister?

Willey: Yes, of recent times.

[0:40:42] Lee: This is a four letter word beginning with p?

Willey: Yes.

[0:40:45] Lee: OK. We have to explain, because this might be listened to in fifty years' time. A Government minister² allegedly called a policeman a pleb and had to resign as Chief Whip of the Conservative party. You went back to the Antarctic as part of this Marguerite Bay 2000 trip?

Willey: Yes.

[0:41:02] Lee: So what were your impressions about how things had changed?

Willey: Vastly. We were the end of Fuchs's era which wasn't expedition type work but it was similar to it. A lot of our time was survival. From here on what I have been talking about was survival. What I saw was modern science carried out in the Antarctic scenery. The people were very dedicated, very capable. They had very strict timetables and programmes to follow. The only thing I thought was wrong with it was I don't think they lifted their heads and looked at the horizon.

[0:41:54] Lee: How do you mean?

Willey: I don't think they appreciated where they were. It was as if they were still working in Cambridge, Birmingham or wherever, and they just happened to be in a bit of snow and ice. And they did their work and they didn't winter to a large extent in

² Andrew Mitchell and the 'Plebgate Affair'. [Wikipedia]

those days, the scientists that is. I think you have to winter really to appreciate the Antarctic.

[0:42:21] Lee: Are you suggesting that wonders passed them by?

Willey: Perhaps not. It's just my impression of them. They perhaps did appreciate it but they didn't seem to. And to some extent the new life ... In our days, as a geologist, I was the lowest of the low inasmuch as I had no other skills, whereas the radio operator was essential for communication, the diesel mechanic – if the diesels didn't work, you didn't have any electricity. The GAs were the climbers and the skiers and they looked after us geologists. I was allowed to assist the diesel mechanic to decoke his engine. I could pass him his spanner. Chris Madders allowed me to learn sufficient Morse so he could have a holiday, so I could take over the radio operator's duties for a couple of weeks. Nowadays the scientists have their own suite, en-suite facilities. Somebody makes their bed for them; somebody washes their clothes for them. Perhaps I am exaggerating but there is a kitchen staff, and I was talking to the kitchen people on that trip.

[0:43:40] Lee: At Rothera?

Willey: At Rothera, and I got the impression that the scientists didn't mix very much with other personnel, and I saw this when we came down and stopped off at Anvers³ back in the '70s. That second trip I went down, at the height of the Vietnam War, so you had the scientists and you had military and the choice for the military people had been Vietnam or the Antarctic, and most of those guys wished they had chosen Vietnam. We got there and there was all these cardboard boxes on the jetty, and it was snowing and it was raining. And being Fids, we thought 'Well what's going on here?' The scientists met us and said 'Oh just leave it there. The soldiers will clear the jetty when they come out of the cinema', because the staff had a cinema for them, those guys.

[0:44:34] Willey: But being Fids, we said 'No. No way. That stuff is going to be ruined if it is left here.' So we formed a human chain and we got all the boxes and took them up to the base just at the time the soldiers' film finished and they came out. And suddenly the soldiers were our friends because we had done what they would have had to have done. We were part of them, and a good base should not be divided like that. There shouldn't be staff and scientists. That's not good for morale. You immediately split. If you ever went to an Argentinian base in those days, there were two or three officers who lived in 90% of the base, and the rest of the peons (plebs in British terms) were there as servants. That's not good.

[0:45:29] Willey: In our base, when a team of thirteen on base, every thirteenth day you were on cook. Then you were a gash hand which was washing the dishes, taking the toilet buckets to the tide crack. Another day you were feeding the dogs. You did everything as well as being a scientist and that was what Antarctica was all about. Everybody worked together and you became a very close and united group. I understand why they don't do it now, because you don't get the time to do all the science that they try and pack in, but that's how we were so much more together as a

³ The US Palmer station.

unit than I think the modern ones. They come back, they go back to university; and they move on.

[0:46:20] Lee: Do you think the Fids that you met at Rothera in the 21st century, do they have a particular view about their predecessors, including you?

Willey: I was very surprised because I met the then deputy director⁴, who I didn't know from Adam, but apparently he had been a new Fid the year after Cape Jeremy, and apparently he had shaken my hand on the way out. And as far as he was concerned, I was a folk hero.

[0:46:54] Lee: You were in the mythology?

Willey: I was in the mythology. I suppose with Cape Jeremy, I had to be in the mythology. But it only struck me then how these ... – and he wasn't a young guy; he was probably late forties, early fifties but he looked upon us as a different breed, and he was a deputy director. So he wasn't just a new Fid.

[0:47:21] Lee: So when the boat arrived at Rothera, with 30 or 40 veteran Fids on board, they were treated with a certain respect?

Willey: Oh very much, yes. They were very friendly to us and there was the guy who was a diesel mechanic at Adelaide in that period and he was the senior engineer in Cambridge who was on a trip, so we knew him. So we knew a couple of people and they obviously had been talking to people on base. They were very friendly people. They showed us around and we marvelled at the amount of equipment, the amount of aircraft they had, and they hadn't lost one for a long time, whereas I think we had a bit of a Jonah on all our aircraft.

[0:48:14] Lee: Let's just go back, if we may Lawrence, to your decision to go back to the Antarctic, your couple years at Stonington and in '72 you went back South again. I think you were offered a proper job, weren't you?

Willey: I was offered a full-time post, yes.

[0:48:29] Lee: Did you leap at that?

Willey: Oh yes, I had fully intended to stay with the Antarctic Survey for the rest of my career if I could.

[0:48:34] Lee: So what happened?

Willey: Fuchs had retired and on his final visit to Birmingham, he had taken me aside and suggested that I should perhaps look for a different career because things were going to change. And at that stage I thought 'No, things will just carry on as they are. There will be changes with this new guy at the top.' But what was happening, which I didn't realise, was the move to get rid of the dogs was already being mooted at higher places. Now anybody who has sledged with dogs, you can't explain, I don't think, to

⁴ This would have been John Dudeney.

anybody else how you feel about your dogs and everybody else's dogs. They are just your children, and when we went back the second time, there was four geologists and we used skidoos. What we didn't realise was that we were being used as a test case to prove to others that dogs weren't necessarily required.

[0:49:45] Willey: Skidoos had been in the Antarctic prior to that. We actually had one on base, but they were mechanically very unreliable. Basically they weren't good. As I said earlier, we had an excellent summer. We had a hundred days on the ice and we worked a hundred days, and we were more productive in that period than most people had been for yonks. But to come back and find that because we had been successful, this was being used against the dogs ... Every night we would strip those engines down; we'd fiddled with them. We'd looked after them. We'd been very lucky. We'd gone over crevasses we shouldn't have gone over but we'd had some experience, to some extent, of where the crevasses were going to be. So it was four experienced guys, and to find that this was being used against the dogs was a bit of a ... Not a good one. Once I became permanent, they allocated you to different committees and I was allocated to the Safety and Field committee.

[0:51:03] Willey: And another thing which ..., because by then I had become an Associate Fellow of Birmingham University, which was one way of getting a car parking place. But part of the deal was that you would befriend the students. And every year there was the annual sort of job market, and that first year the Shell guy came and the students had asked me go in with them because they were a bit shy. I don't know – things have changed a lot about shyness of students ... but they felt a bit shy. And I had asked a few inane questions to the Shell guy just to keep the things running. And at the end they hand out application forms and this guy came over to me and said 'Obviously interested in your questions but you haven't filled in an application form.' I said 'Oh no, I am not looking. I am quite happy with the job I have got.'

[0:52:06] Willey: Then we did the trip, came back, and again the next year's lot of students – I was in on that, and the Shell guy came over and said 'Look, go to the Hague for a week, all expenses paid. Enjoy yourself. Talk to the guys over there. No ties. If you don't want it, don't, but go and have a week's holiday.' So I rang up London and I said to the secretary 'Look, I really need to get this committee a meeting and discuss what's happening because I have got certain qualms about what has been said and done, reference the dogs and the skidoos. And the secretary said 'Sorry, the Director is far too busy to have a committee meeting.' So I said 'Fair enough. Do you think I could have a week's leave?' 'Yes, no problem, a week's leave. See Ray Adie. A week's leave? Yes, no problem.' Go to the Hague, had a good week, met some nice guys.

[0:53:13] Willey: They offered me a job. I didn't take it at that stage. I went back to Birmingham, rang up London and said 'Look, I really want that committee to sit and discuss things. It's two years since that committee met. It's far too long because there are things happening. You put me on the committee. I am asking the Director seriously. We must have that meeting.' And she said basically 'You are not going to have that meeting. He's not going to have it. There are things happening. He doesn't want to talk to you.' So I said 'OK. My resignation is in the post.'

[0:53:51] Lee: This was Dick Laws, I presume?

Willey: Yep. Dick was probably right. I'm not saying I think I was wrong.

[0:54:00] Lee: But were you not railing against progress?

Willey: Yes. That's what I say. I think Dick was right, but as I said to you, emotions about the dogs and reality are two different things. I was quite mild compared to some of the guys' reaction to what was going on but I couldn't stand and watch the changes. I wanted to stay but I wouldn't stay if I wasn't at least even allowed to go to a committee meeting and talk to the guy.

[0:54:39] Lee: You were being denied access to the Director, weren't you?

Willey: He might have said 'Come in' and tell me what is the reality and I might have accepted it. I don't know. I was denied that possibility and that's ...

[0:54:54] Lee: Are you still bitter about that?

Willey: No, I think Dick was ...

[0:54:58] Lee: Because your career looks quite promising afterwards.

Willey: Dick was doing the right thing for the Survey. I was living in Fuchs's ... and Fuchs had told me. I couldn't continue living ... We had a whale of a life time but things had to change. I was the one that was wrong. I let my emotions rule my head, but as far as I was concerned, I had responsibilities for the guys and I thought those guys were put at risk by going into skidoos at that time without really thinking it through. And dogs lasted for a few more years.

[0:55:44] Lee: So you were concerned that the introduction of skidoos was a bit rapid, were you?

Willey: Yes, for people I was thinking in terms of myself going down as a greenhorn and be put in the field with skidoos. There was no-one in Britain who had experience of working skidoos, so whereas we had old GAs who knew about dogs, ...

[0:56:13] Lee: Are you speaking here with your Health & Safety hat on?

Willey: Yes. We were going to send people into the field with skidoos into crevasses. You couldn't take the skidoos over sea ice so you are going to have to rely on aircraft. But going to crevassed areas and no dogs. Dogs have a sixth sense. They can pick out crevasses that you don't see. We had one occasion on the sea ice in the mink on that first trip. George's team were going and suddenly stopped. And George, a bit short-tempered and I was behind them. So eventually Gorge said 'Go and sort that ...' – it was a female leader – 'Go and sort that bitch out.' So I wandered up to the bitch and she is sitting down. I get to her and then I suddenly realise: she has stopped at a deep chasm. And what we had done, we had sledged up a tabular berg, up to the top of it, and, as a good dog should, she didn't want to go over the top and fall. She had just got dog sense.

[0:57:33] Lee: Were your fears ever borne out? Were there some early skidoo accidents down to lack of experience?

Willey: I don't think anybody was killed, but as I say, dogs did continue for a while. So things weren't happening as I thought they might, but my worries were there and the fact that you couldn't talk to anybody made it worse.

[0:58:03] Lee: A mark of disrespect?

Willey: You shouldn't put people on committees if you don't have committee meetings.

[0:58:13] Lee: I mentioned your illustrious career round the world more than once it seems to me, but you enigmatically refer to an underground accident that brought your career to a conclusion in 1992, yet you are still here.

Willey: Yes, well I was lucky.

[0:58:29] Lee: Again?

Willey: Yes, I was working ...

[0:58:33] Lee: Let's finish with this. What happened to you?

Willey: I was a consultant by that stage and I was sent by the British Government to assist the Iranian Government join one of the ??? [incomprehensible] in diplomatic cross-fire. I went underground with some of their party and there was a fall and I went down with it and was buried.

[0:58:58] Lee: Pothole was this?

Willey: No no, in a mine. Mine fall. Afterwards the Iranians, chatting, and they said ... Well basically they decided to dig me out because if I had died then the mine would have been haunted by this Christian, which wasn't looked upon as a good thing. So they got me out but I had a bit of head injury which was a bit more than ... Well it could be adding on to previous injuries and so forth and I lost my sight for a while and basically the insurance for the company ... it just wasn't on.

[0:58:50] Lee: You were uninsurable?

Willey: Well yes. So they offered me early retirement. I did one last trip, to Spitzbergen, so I thought 'I have gone South and I have gone North. Offer me early retirement and I will take it.' And I did. End of career.

[1:00:08] Lee: But the beginning of being a Justice of the Peace?

Willey: I did a couple of other voluntary things before that, but yes, coming up fourteen years, coming fifteen years, which I have enjoyed.

[1:00:23] Lee: Despite the rather sour ending, when you weren't being listened to in '74, how does the Antarctic years rate in your life?

Willey: Oh, very high. Boys' Wonder; boys with toys. I think we were very fortunate. I think we were the lucky generation throughout, in generality. People of our age, we didn't have to go and fight a war. We had possibilities of education which weren't available to other people. We had jobs. I worked in Australia for a while and I loved to tell the Australians that when I was at college, the High Commissioner for Australia used to come round and say 'Right, we will fly you to Australia.' And this is the time of the Ten Pound Pom on the Boat. 'We will fly you to Australia. Have a look round Australia, see if there is anything you like. We will fly you home, fix up the paperwork and we will fly you back in again to do the work.' And the Australians didn't like that, but that's how life was. We've been very lucky.

[1:01:33] Lee: You have been very lucky on many occasions, it seems to me. Lawrence, thank you very much indeed for your time.

Willey: Thank you.

[1:01:40] [End]

ENDS

Possible extracts:

- [0:07:47] A faulty primus and carbon monoxide poisoning.
- [0:11:53] Arseade - into a wind scoop.
- [0:17:48] Marooned on a football pitch sized ice floe.
- [0:32:50] Saved by a snow bridge.
- [0:36:17] Uncontrolled mountain descent.
- [0:38:41] Faux pas at the Governor's party.
- [0:38:41] Lady Haskard grows vegetables for the bases.
- [0:44:34] Helpful Fids at an American base.
- [0:49:45] Successful skidoo trip used against the dogs.
- [0:56:13] Dogs have a sixth sense.