Edited transcript of a recording of Malky Macrae interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 28th October 2012. BAS Archives AD6/24/1/200 Transcribed by Andy Smith, 9th November 2015.

[0:00:00] Lee: This is Malcolm Macrae, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 28th of October 2012.

Macrae: My name is Malcolm Macrae. I was born in Glasgow, Springburn, which is a working-class area on the north side of the city. That was in November 16th, 1944.

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

Macrae: I will be 68 next month.

[0:00:26] Lee: OK, and what sort of education did you have, Malcolm? Do I call you Malky?

Macrae: Yes, call me Malky. It was quite a reasonable education in these days in Scotland. I had a good primary school education. Again, discipline wasn't a problem in these days. The teachers used a belt. They weren't frightened to use a belt and you knew how far you could go. Secondary education: again, I went to what was called a senior secondary in these days. It was equivalent to an English grammar school. Now the first couple of years were actually quite good. When you went to these schools, you were expected to go on to get your Highers. By the third year the idea, a career in education and being educated was beginning to pall somewhat. Now in the 60's, the early 60's in these days, the Clyde: heavy engineering.

[0:01:26] Macrae: The whole of Glasgow was heavy engineering and I remember thinking when I was about 16 … That's right. I was 15 because I was going into my fourth year and I thought 'Do I want another year of this?' And I thought 'Not really.' So I then decided, well I was going to leave school. The next problem was headmaster, parents. 'Why does he want to leave school?' My answer to that one was 'Well, I am fed up with it.' So: 'OK, you can leave school.' So I left school at 15½, very quickly got a job in Harland & Wolff's which was a big big engineering company. They built ships in Belfast, Southampton, and on the Clyde – engineering works all over the UK. I started off in the drawing office as a message boy which was quite interesting. The most embarrassing thing for someone of 15½ was: in these days in the drawing offices they had huge rooms, maybe 100 ft long, full of girls who were tracers. The draughtsmen in these days did the drawings, the girls traced them. Then they were printed and sent out to the shop floor.

[0:02:42] Macrae: These girls loved the chance of heckling any man that came down into the drawing office. Now, what they did: they knew right away, as soon as they picked on you, you were going to have a red face and by the time you got to the end of that drawing office you certainly had a red face. So after that: 16, apprenticeship, heavy engineering apprenticeship, fitter-turner. I ended up as a millwright. And then after that it was: what do you do with yourself? Now in these days, down the Pool, which was where you got graded to go to sea, got your grading papers. I think I was a

A … A was the best, B was the next best heavy engineering apprenticeship. So I then went to sea. I went to sea for probably about a year, near enough, 9 months/ 10 months. I would say it was an interesting experience. I wouldn't say it was one of life's most pleasant experiences but I learned a lot, mainly: don't go to sea in tankers.

[0:03:46] Macrae: I was actually talking to one of the lads last night about this and he had never been in tankers and he was quite shocked when I actually told him in these days you joined a ship … I flew out to Genoa, I joined the ship and the first job we were presented with was on top of what they called the exhaust gas boilers, where basically the ship's engine exhaust went up through a funnel, and round the funnel there were tubes. So it was basically a heat transfer system Some of the heat from the exhaust was transferred into the tubes which heated up water and these tubes had a habit of leaking. So you were in there with the fumes, big boiler suit, gloves on. Everything was very very hot indeed. You had a plastic bucket, or preferably a zinc bucket as I found later was the answer. Tools in the water and a cheap paper mask on to save yourself getting all sorts of noxious fumes. After four hours of that, you were just about dead, you know. The temperature was probably in the 40's anyhow. From someone coming from sunny cold Scotland, into a temperature like that, it was horrendous.

[0:04:56] Lee: So it wouldn't take much to tempt you away from that kind of job, then?

Macrae: Well it wasn't so much that. The hardship, it wasn't really a hardship for us because we were used to working in temperatures like that in the maintenance side. We repaired boilers and compressors and things like that and a lot of the work was done … Health & Safety wasn't a concern in these days. The main thing was to keep the thing going and if you'd a production line, for instance, compressed air is a necessity because all the hand tools or nearly them all were compressed air. So you then had to make sure it was going in. The works manager wasn't interested in the fact that it was 45/ 50 degrees up there. He wanted the thing going, so the hardship wasn't a problem. What I actually did find was a problem that we sailed from Genoa to Novorossiysk and Batumi in the Black Sea. Now in these days Russia was Soviet Russia so you went into the harbour; there was all the guards, troops, everything and what really impressed us was, in the dockside, the dockers, lots of then were … well we assumed they were women because they were wearing skirts but my God, they were some giants of women. The story was that when the winches broke down on the Russian ships, the women were the winches. But it really was quite an experience.

[0:06:25] Lee: How did you come to go to the Antarctic then? What was the inspiration for that?

Macrae: That was basically through the engineering side of it. I met a lad when I was an apprentice who was interested in going climbing, Now he asked me one weekend did I fancy going up to Glencoe climbing. I thought 'Well, aye, all right then, Willy. Away we go.' So he had got himself a rope and then managed to get another one of the lads, and went up to Glencoe. Up the hill and it is probably the closest I ever came to death climbing, on a very easy route but it was the usual scenario. Nobody knew what they were doing. Three guys strung across this very easy route but had no idea what to do. We eventually got to the top and Willy then introduced me to some other

guys and at that time I was in the TA Parachute Regiment and that was taking up a bit of time. I was more interested in that for a while.

[0:07:28] Macrae: Then eventually Willy said 'Look. Do you fancy going away camping again?' So we went up to Skye, camping, and then started to meet other guys. Some of the blokes that we met were talking about this group of guys Davy Todd, Jimmy Gardiner, John Cunningham. You've probably heard these names before. We were down South just now. They were in the Creagh Dhu Mountaineering Club and in that time we were starting to go up to Glencoe and we managed to inveigle our way into one of the bothies up there, Cameron's Barn, and the Creagh Dhu had their Jacksonville down the road in these days. It was quite a small scene really so there was not a lot to do on a Saturday night except go to the pub and drink, and eventually these guys came back from the Antarctic and we were talking away a bit. 'It was a great place.' Then one of them came in with this fancy Ventile anorak and we were looking at these anoraks.

[0:08:24] Macrae: This was the start of the winter. I said 'Where did you get that from?' He says 'Great. Antarctic Survey. You know you go down there. They give you all your gear, that you use.' And we were saying 'Really? What else do you get?' Then the thing that clinched in for me was 'And you get two Expedition Fairydown sleeping bags.' I thought 'You beauty.' Because in these days we were just using Milletts what they called 'thin wall specials'. The winter we just came through was '63 which was one of the coldest winters in Scotland. We were basically wearing every article of clothing that we had. There was no airbeds in these days. You put any spare clothing that you weren't wearing and old newspapers underneath you, three or four pints of local anaesthetic in a pub. So the idea of this sleeping bag thing, that completely clinched it for me.

[0:09:15] Lee: So that seriously was the reason why you applied?

Macrae: Yes one. I wasn't averse to going. The Antarctic to me, really it wasn't probably as much a big deal as it is to lots of these other guys who …, especially the scientists who may never have had any real outdoor interest. When we were doing things in the tops of Scottish mountains dressed in jeans and things that were probably more dangerous than most of the things I ever did down South. And the adventure side, it was a bit of a bonus.

[0:09:46] Lee: Do you remember the interview you had? This would be '68, would it be?

Macrae: Early '68 yes. I can remember, it's a bit hazy but I can remember bits of it. It was where … It would be Bill Sloman at the time, and I remember a question was 'How did you get down here?' Now there was a rail strike that weekend. I said 'I just came down on the bus.' And he said to me 'Funny. There's two chaps here said they couldn't get here from Scotland.' I said 'Well I don't know why they couldn't get.' So that was that. Another thing …

[0:10:17] Lee: So that showed initiative, on travel?

Macrae: More or less, yes. But the reason for me coming down on the bus was: it was cheaper, and I didn't know whether you were going to get expenses or not and there was no way I was throwing money around in these days. So that was fine and then you had this, from what I remember it was pretty cursory medical examination. I think the guy, he was Dr Haywood. I may be wrong on this but I think that was his name and the only thing I can remember: it was like a standard Army medical. A quick look over, look in your eyes, cough and then that seemed to be it. The next thing was, you got your contract.

[0:10:54] Lee: Were you surprised to be employed?

Macrae: No not really. I wasn't really because I was aware by the way the interview was going that they had difficulty getting people with quite broad mechanical knowledge. It was easier to get scientists than to get cooks and mechanics.

[0:11:16] Lee: So you had an engineering background and lots of mountain experience?

Macrae: I would say the engineering background probably was more important because all the GAs had mountaineering experience in these days. So it would be a combination of things but I certainly think my pedigree from the Clyde and the glowing references I could produce from my employers was probably good enough for that.

[0:11:40] Lee: So were you appointed as a GA or as a mechanic or …?

Macrae: As a tractor mechanic. At that time I didn't really know where the distinction was but when I got down South I found out that basically tractor mechanics … I went to Halley Bay which was the biggest base. Now Halley had the generator shed. You had a diesel mech for the generators and at that time we had three tractor mechs and there was one diesel mechanic. So you were basically a tractor mech but you did everything you know. That was your main purpose being there and a lot of that was really ferrying stuff round about the base, although the rest of the base members did that as well. There wasn't a rigid demarcation that you could only do this. You know you were expected to (you know yourself) do the gash and everything, so it wasn't that important to me really. When it suited you, it was handy being a tractor mech but there was other times you would rather have been doing something else. But that was life, you know.

[0:12:56] Lee: What was the first base you were employed on?

Macrae: Halley Bay. That was a third of the way down the Weddell Sea in Coates Land, and that was the biggest British base at the time. I think there was 30-odd guys there then[1]. Again I should have made a note of the numbers.

[0:13:15] Lee: No it's all right.

[1] 28 men wintered at Halley Bay in 1969.

Macrae: But it was … at that point in time, Halley, I think it was Halley II, it was pretty well buried in the snow. So your access to the base, and that was a bit of an eye-opener. You got off the ship, you went up in the Muskeg tractors and you saw these shafts sticking out from the snow and entrance to the base (pedestrian access as they would say nowadays) was down a series of ladders into tunnels in the snow and that's what the base was.

[0:13:54] Lee: Were you expecting to be living underground?

Macrae: I was aware of that. I was aware that was the main accommodation in the base and I didn't suffer from claustrophobia or anything like that, so it didn't bother me. And it made sense because the weather on the surface was pretty foul and after all rabbits stay down holes to keep out of the bad weather, so why shouldn't we?

[0:14:16] Lee: How were the tractors that you had to become the mechanic of? These would be International Harvesters, I guess.

Macrae: International Harvesters and there was Muskeg tractors. The Muskegs were … For those used to driving sports cars, it would be horrendous but they were more fun, they were more manoeuvrable and if you could get them going down a hill, you could get a fair lick out of them. But the International Harvesters, they were evidently converted from forestry vehicles with broad tracks and they were just used around the base for pulling heavy loads. Some of them were fitted with broad blades so you could use them as bulldozers as well. Basic maintenance and in the winter you would tend to, if you were going to use a tractor out in the field, you would try to strip them down and make sure they were thoroughly overhauled before you went out in the field. Looking back on it now, a lot of the work was excessive really. It wasn't necessary. You were being over-cautious I think, but certainly it filled the long winter's night. There was no problem for us to do.

[0:15:31] Lee: Were you able to house them in a sheltered environment?

Macrae: Well what they had, they had an underground garage and there was a ramp went down to the garage, which was fine until the first blow. So you would get a blizzard and if it lasted for a week you had no ramp. So this is where having a few tractor mechanics is handy and anybody else on the base that was spare. You then went out with a shovel and basically you always left an International Harvester on the surface or maybe two, with their blades, so you could dig out the ramp to get the vehicles in and out. And any time you needed to get anything in and out, that's what you had to do. So, again, it was quite hard physical work, but kept you fit.

[0:16:25] Lee: What was it like working on diesel engines at −30, −40 degrees?

Macrae: You tried not to work on them, basically. You only did what was necessary, but it's a fallacy, lots of the stuff they tell you about. 'The metal breaks at −30.' Well there's a four-letter word that begins with S and finishes with T. It may have happened with some metals. I certainly never ever remember it happening, but the International Harvesters especially had fitted in the cabs what was used at the time to heat buses I think it was, a Webasto air heater. It worked on paraffin; it was a pump and a combustion chamber and a fan. So you blew the hot air into the engines. The

idea was: if there was enough in the battery, you always … If the battery went flat, you would just get another one from base, from the garage, and hump it across the snow and put it in.

[0:17:23] Macrae: When you got the heating going, you heated up the engine and then you just put in, there was an ether cartridge you could put into the little hole there, pressed it in and it fed in neat ether to the cylinders. Turned it over and away it went. Sometimes it wasn't just as easy as that but it certainly wasn't a problem. You could also utilise that if you were working on a vehicle. Only an idiot would work on an engine with a heater switched off. If you could get the heater going first, that was half the battle. No-one stuck a blowlamp or a primus stove underneath it. And build a wee snow shed round it. It was the same in the field with the Muskeg tractors. If you were going to service it, you would try to pick a good day. If it said your oil had to be changed, say, every 50 hours, well if it was 55 whatever, tough luck, even 100. You would do it when you had a chance.

[0:18:25] Lee: Were the Muskegs reliable?

Macrae: I would say they were, yes. I am actually trying to think. You had a few problems with them but most of the problems were related to fuel. If you got water in the fuel, there was a carburettor bowl; water could freeze in the carburettor bowl, but once you knew what it was, you would just get a blowlamp, heat up the carburettor bowl, and play a blowlamp over the manifold. Not to be recommended in the UK, but that is what you did. Blowlamps, if you were good with them, you could start almost anything. The big killer was wind. If you were outside in the field, trying to start something and it was really windy and cold, then it would be more difficult. I will come onto it later, but it was on other bases where I had more problems with that sort of thing but Halley wasn't a particularly difficult base really to work on. It was time consuming with everything being under the surface.

[0:19:28] Macrae: Another problem was, everything on the surface drifted over, fuel, food etc. But the dumps were marked and if you needed the stuff, you got a sledge, towed it out and two or three would dig it out or use a bulldozer to clear it. So I wouldn't say it was a major problem. The major problem was that the ice pressure underneath; the snow was compact, turning it into ice. You got heat spots where warm air escaped into the chambers. The chambers then formed round the buildings and then you got icicles starting to form and then the icicles started to press through the roof. There was another, old, base, Halley-I which you used to go down. You'll have heard of it as well. Down the ladders into Halley-I and it was like Santa's grotto but 60 feet underground. There was icicles through the roofs, pianos[2], ice grottos full of crystals. Quite scenic actually. As a matter of fact I just wish I had probably, at that particular time, taken more photographs, but all that's happened over the photographs: they lie in boxes at home. Every other Fid will have told you the same thing. It's all on record but you don't know where it is now.

[0:20:42] Lee: Were you able to access the spares you needed for these machines? I am not just thinking of Halley; I am thinking generally now? You said you had problems elsewhere.

[2] A piano was abandoned at Halley-I. In 1972 it was recovered and brought to Halley-II.

Macrae: We had more spares than you would need and the other thing was, you could make a lot of stuff. We had a small workshop. We had a lathe and lots of bits of spare metal and things of that sort. If you were reasonably good with the lathe, you could certainly make things, and fabricate things. I can't actually remember any vehicle being unusable because we couldn't improvise or didn't have something. Although we had one vehicle that was not in an official inventory and again you will have heard of this from the Halley Fids. There was a Lansing snowmobile[3]. It was basically a chassis with four skis on it and an aircraft engine in the back of it which had been sent down in the early days at Halley, the idea being for a quick evacuation; if someone had an accident in the field, this thing, aircraft engine – they used them in Canada. You could just blast across the snow, arrive, and take the casualty away.

[0:21:59] Macrae: Well I don't know if it was ever used for that but certainly it had been buried under the snow for quite a long time and one of the lads before us, a guy called Abdul (he was the electrician) … There was two guys, Abdul and Johnny Carter, they were down the first year I was at Halley. They had just finished their third winter at Halley, which explained a lot, what was going on in their brains, but that's beside the point. So they dug it out and got this thing going and what you used to do with it was: Abdul was pretty jealous of his machine, but occasionally you would get a wee shock if you were lucky How it was started was that you basically poured ether into it, lay across the engine, got hold of it and swung it, the propeller, by hand, hoping it would fire and not take your head off. It had a total loss oil system because the seals were away on it. What you did, you just filled it up with old oil and you blasted across the bondu, leaving a trail of oil. Totally non PC now but in these days it didn't matter and it was lots of fun apart from when you used to rip up the telephone cables down to huts out on the bondu.

[0:23:14] Lee: What do you mean? So you would accidentally rip through cables?

Macrae: Oh yes. What actually happened was: there was a place called Mobster Creek and they had a sledge. It was called a caboose. It was a sledge with just like a wooden hut built on it and you could go down there and there were a few emergency supplies in case you got stuck there. Also the other thing about Mobster Creek in the winter, there was an emperor penguin colony which was a good day out for the troops. But the idea had been they could run basically field telephone cables, same as the Army did, which they probably buried when they put it in but the snow soon took care of that. One particular incident: we went down to Mobster Creek, came back, and the guy that was driving this thing said to me 'There's something wrong with this thing; it's dragging in the snow.' Aye, it was dragging in the snow all right; there was probably about half a mile of telephone cable dragging along behind us. They took care of that; just cut it off and dumped it.

[0:24:14] Lee: Did you have to spend much time out in the field or were you really tied to bases?

Macrae: No, no. I was actually involved in field trips from Halley Bay. I think I was on two field trips from Halley. The first one was with a thing called a Fox Trac motor

[3] Actually a Lansing Snow Plane.

sledge. I went out with a surveyor and that was my first real introduction into Antarctic travel. It was quite interesting. You certainly knew about crevasses things like that but you weren't actually in Scotland, you didn't come across lots of crevasses. You came across bergschrunds. I had been to the Alps and places like that and you knew to be careful but you hadn't actually been driving anything over them, so you basically had a thing: it was like a pole with a chisel on the end. It was called a bog chisel and all you did was, you probed in front of you and found what you thought you could drive across and do that, but that was an introduction into camping, which probably for most people to camp in the Antarctic, it would be horrendous.

[0:25:24] Macrae: We actually had very good tents. I thought they were very good tents and we also had these wonderful Fairydown sleeping bags which was the whole purpose of being there. So certainly in the early days, this would be probably towards the end of the summer, the temperatures were quite high, probably −10, −15. That wasn't particularly cold and that was really my first introduction to that, and on the way back the Fox Trac broke down and we had to be rescued. Again, that was an introduction into how reliable Fox Tracs were. But this was in the early days of the Survey using motor sledges. They had used a thing called an Eliason motor sledge before which has roughly the same pedigree of reliability as the Fox Tracs, but being an engineer, that's what you were there for, so you might as well fix it.

[0:26:20] Lee: Did you pick up much about the science that was being done? Did you talk to scientists?

Macrae: Oh yes, you would work with them as well. You would give them a hand. It was ionospherics, meteorology, geophysics, and there had been glaciology. There was survey there and geology, so you would give people a hand and they would give you a hand. There was no rigid demarcation about what you could or could not do. It was a very good place if you were interested; you could learn an awful lot, and I actually found it quite an interesting experience just watching what the met men did with their … how you put the balloons out, and theodolite surveys. That's when I actually learned how useful trigonometry was and wished I had paid a lot more attention to it at school. I did rectify quite a lot of that later on. Certainly the scientific side at Halley was quite far advanced and at that particular time, '69 was a maximum sunspot year, which then meant you had wonderful aurora.

[0:27:39] Lee: You saw that, did you?

Macrae: Oh we definitely did. What we used to do: as you were a tractor driver … The International Harvesters had a large cab on them and in the top of the cab there was an escape hatch. You opened this escape hatch in the winter, started up the engine, put the heater on and you just sat there and you watched all this. But the rest of the base couldn't get in your cab; your pals couldn't get in your cab; the rest were huddled round outside trying to keep out of the wind. Superb displays; it was a wonderful place for taking photographs because your camera didn't frost up because it was inside. It was only when you took it out that it did.

[0:28:19] Lee: I have never heard of an International Harvester being an observatory before.

Macrae: Oh yes. That's what you have got a brain for.

[0:28:26] Lee: Would that happen a lot? Would you be out there a lot or just on rare occasions?

Macrae: If there was anything worth looking at, yes. Another thing we did in the winter … this idea that the winter is permanent darkness is a load of rubbish.

[0:28:40] Lee: Really?

Macrae: Yes, because you've a large … Probably just about midwinter dead-on you'd very little light but on each side of it, although the sun was below the horizon you'd absolutely (you really need to see it to believe it), absolutely crimson beautiful sky. Everything was crimson, crimson snow, and you would go down to visit the emperor penguin colonies. You would drive down with a Muskeg or an International Harvester and walk down to the colonies, and the colonies were a fantastic sight because the penguins huddled together and above them you had their breath and it was an absolutely beautiful crimson glow, with the light shining through it, through their breath. It was like a crimson cloud balanced on their heads.

[0:29:34] Macrae: But the other thing we then found was: you would go down to the colony and here and there there were abandoned eggs, so you could get your emperor penguin egg to bring home. But there was another lesson we learned very quickly there. On the edge of the colony, these colonies were not, as we discovered, completely static things and on one particular occasion we had dumped all our gear at the edge of the colony and went a way round to the other side of the colony to get what we thought were better photographs. Of course the penguins, as we went round, they tended to shuffle slightly back from us. By the time we got back, where was our stuff? So again, not politically correct; there was a bit of chucking penguins out of the way until we finally got our gear.

[0:30:23] Lee: So you had to wade into the huddle?

Macrae: More or less, yes. Another problem was the smell. The penguin guano absolutely stank. It wasn't too bad in the winter, but certainly if you went down in the spring, when the sun was starting to get risen, it was gas-mask time almost. But like all things, you got used to it you know.

[0:30:44] Lee: It sounds like you had a great time at Halley, so how come the move to Fossil Bluff for the second year?

Macrae: Well that's the good side. Halley: being underground for quite a lot of the year, under the snow for quite a lot of the year, you won't get any group of men anywhere without some sort of tensions. And there was certain tensions, but it was a bit limiting for me. When I actually went down on the ship to the Antarctic, there was other guys going to other bases and I knew you could transfer bases. I had always had the idea in the back of my mind to transfer base. Now there was a base called Fossil Bluff which again you will have heard of, which sounded more like my type of base. It was basically a hut about 12 foot square, 4 bunks, workbench, Raeburn and the toilet was a tent out on the bondu which was no big thing. But I put in a request for

the transfer and got transferred to the Bluff and that really was much more my scene because for a start, even out on the ship, went to Stanley and then you transferred, and then headed down the Peninsula in the *Biscoe*.

[0:32:10] Macrae: And on the way down, you were going to the other bases, seeing guys who had been down there. You were then getting involved in the sealing; that was another thing. I don't actually know if that would have been allowed now because they were killing two or three hundred seals for dog food which again, in these days, as there was no commercial sealing going on, no big thing. Unless you were a seal, it wasn't a problem. Again, that was something that I had worked on when I was in Glencoe sometimes with the stalkers. We used to bring the stags off the hills and they would gralloch them, which is basically, it isn't a lot different from gutting seals. My father, he had been a Highlander and he showed me how you snare rabbits. That wasn't any great disaster. And shooting the seals was quite an interesting thing as well because at that time it depended what scientists were on board and what specimens they were looking for, but at one particular point they were collecting internal parasites, mainly out of crabeater seals. So you then had your jars of formaldehyde and you would open up the stomachs of the crabeater seals and see what was there.

[0:33:34] Macrae: Anything interesting went into the jar and then away it went. We shot a leopard seal. This was a whole box of goodies because the teeth were removed, the jaws were removed, things like that, brought home as souvenirs. The whole way down the Peninsula was very interesting because there is quite a lot of historic stuff. South Georgia, that was an absolutely fantastic place. South Georgia I could actually, quite happily have spent a lot more time on because I have always been very interested in the whaling industry in the region, the Scottish side of it, and here it was all on your doorstep. And my brother, he had been a radio operator at sea. It would be '65 I think, '64 or '65, he went down to South Georgia for two years, not with the Survey but with the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey[4], which were the guys that were running it at the time. So the main reason for not doing that at the time was: I thought South Georgia would be too limiting as an island. Big mistake but it doesn't really matter you know.

[0:34:43] Macrae: It was always something new and something interesting. The next thing of course was when you arrived at Adelaide, that was the hub of the airport; that was our Antarctic airport. Basically the way into Fossil Bluff was by air. I didn't find anything odd about that because I had been in the TA and I was used to jumping out of aeroplanes. So being in them longer wasn't any problem. Certainly the Adelaide side of it was quite good fun. There's plenty of things to do in Adelaide and there's plenty of laughs there but I won't go into that. A lot of them are drink fuelled, needless to say, which the Survey probably would not have liked at the time.

[0:35:36] Lee: You were just passing through Adelaide?

Macrae: Yes, on the way down.

[0:35:39] Lee: This particular year which was 1970?

[4] He possibly means the Falkland Islands Government.

Macrae: Yes.

[0:35:41] Lee: To go to Fossil Bluff?

Macrae: Yes.

[0:35:43] Lee: So was the work very different at Fossil Bluff, from Halley?

Macrae: Not particularly because Fossil Bluff was set up as mainly glaciology. First when I arrived there, there was a guy, George Kistruck (you'll know), Paul Gurling who was a surveyor. George was a glaciologist; Paul was a surveyor, and Brian Hill was a GA. I was there as a sort of tractor mech. They had two Muskeg tractors that had been driven down over the sea ice in the early '60's and they had stayed there, and we had a Fox Trac. It was a version that we had at Halley Bay which previous experience proved quite useful. So what we were doing basically, we were there to support George and his glaciology. And Paul Gurling, the surveyor, was doing astro-fixes at the time. That was before GPS satellites. They had a position and they were taking sun shots to accurately fix the position at that point as a reference point for triangulation in the area. It doesn't sound a lot to spend a winter and a summer doing it, but that certainly covered it.

[0:37:07] Lee: So when the time came to return to the UK because your contract was over, were you leaving the Antarctic, you thought, for the last time, or were you already intending to return?

Macrae: No.

[0:37:26] Lee: Unfinished business?

Macrae: I thought well I could probably go back down. Unfinished business yes, but I thought I would see what it was like. When I went home, I didn't go straight home. I got off the ship in South America and travelled up through South America and what I am still surprised to this day, that I didn't end up staying there because I found it very very interesting. It sounds rather odd but the people, I would say they were much more open, and much more friendly. They didn't have this sort of facade that you have in the UK, where everyone's reserved. People would be open with you and you could be open with them. But it certainly wasn't the end of it.

[0:38:14] Lee: Did you have to re-apply?

Macrae: Basically at the time I came back and I thought 'What am I going to do?' I had a half offer of a job up in the North, water project up in Baffin Bay and I sort of swithered[5] about that. But I then I went and applied, I went into the Office and I think it might have been Eric Salmon at the time (I think his name was), and he said, more or less, 'Do you fancy going down South, nearer your pals?' I thought 'OK' so that was me back enrolled again. But that was quite an interesting time actually. We left the UK, did the usual: the Falkland Islands. Everybody got drunk; you know, the

[5] Scottish word for dithered.

usual scenario. We got down as far as … I got off in South Georgia, spent some time in South Georgia, which was quite interesting because there was a guy there, a boatman, came from the Shetlands. There was one incident I always remember. It was a really wild day and we were sitting in the old Shack House and we had a huge great big glass window. Someone said 'Christ, there's Bob out in a boat,' And here was Bob, roaring like the clappers in this boat, and we thought 'Shit, he's got swept out.' So there was a big rush down to get a launch going and what have you.

[0:39:53] Lee: Bob?

Macrae: Bob Clunas, I think was his name. This is what you recollect.

[0:40:02] Lee: That's all right.

Macrae: They got the launch out to Bob asked Bob 'We'll tow you in' and Bob says 'No, I am out here fishing.' Bob was rowing up and down, trawling a line to try to catch notathenia. That was the sort of thing that went on. After that there was various ports of call. I couldn't detail them all, where you went, Signy and all these places. But we ended up at that time, Anvers Island. They were talking about making it a sort of staging post for some of the aircraft. At Anvers Island there was the old base. I have forgotten the number, what it was called[6] but there was quite a lot of work needing to be done in the base and I went ashore. They had generators and things like that, so the idea was pussyfoot about and get the generators going and things like that and another couple of lads were there. We still had ?? [incomprehensible] and I am not getting into the names as far as this story will go but they will know who I and talking about.

[0:41:13] Macrae: We started paint stripping and things like that. They were busy getting on with their paint stripping and I was busy pussyfooting about playing with the generators. I got a radio call from Adelaide Island, from the base commander. They were having a problem with a Muskeg and they asked me, would I go down and give the mechanic a hand? All I will say is 'I am not sure why he couldn't do it himself.' But anyhow I arrived down there and the Muskeg problem was solved very quickly as I knew was going to happen, so I was then at Adelaide and probably the idea at the time would have been to go back to Anvers but I always remember: he was trying to put a drill on a bench in the genny shed. No it wasn't the genny shed; I think it was the tractor shed which was different. It was another shed and they hadn't mounted it properly, so I … That was my job, one of the jobs on the Clyde. I would do right again. If it wasn't right, it was annoying me, so I was cutting a bit of metal in a vice and in these days (this is where it gets technical) you get different types of hacksaw blades. The old nasty ones were very brittle and they broke.

[0:42:52] Macrae: One of them broke, a bit sprang back into my eye and that was that. So there was a bit of humming and hawing about what to do and it would be about two weeks I think it would be, tels going backwards and forwards between London and Adelaide and eventually it was (in brackets) decided … There were bits of pressure from certain people. Actually all I would say that certain people could well have put quite a lot of pressure on what was going on in London at the time, because

[6] Base N.

the problem with the type of injury I had, so I was told, it could spread to the other eye. So you are then sitting there full of painkillers and a bum that's covered in bruises with injections of antibiotics, waiting to decide what was going to happen. Eventually it was decided that it would be better if I was evacuated back to the UK.

[0:44:10] Lee: What time of year was this, Malcolm?

Macrae: This would be in the summer. What I mean by summer, it would probably be November/ December, something like that. That's the Antarctic summer.

[0:44:22] Lee: Did you concur with their conclusion, that going home …?

Macrae: Oh yes. I would say I was visually impaired big time at that point because I had an eye that I couldn't see out of, plus there was a cataract in it because what had actually happened was: the lens envelope had been punctured. It was becoming opaque. There was a chance of some pathetic opthalmia and the last thing I wanted to come back from the Antarctic really was with a white stick and a permanent dog, you know. It's a lot easier to solve these problems – they were solvable at the time but …

[0:44:56] Lee: How did they get you out?

Macrae: Well that was another interesting thing. The idea was to fly me up to … Where did they fly me to? I think it was Anvers Island; I am a bit vague about it. Basically flew me from Adelaide to Anvers Island but taking off – it could have been Anvers Island we were flying from. Anyhow, wherever I was flying from at the time (I am getting a bit vague), we had a great deal of difficulty getting the plane off because of cross-winds on the runway. We were haring down the runway and we got a gust of wind and then the plane would slide sideways, evidently. The plane, when it dropped off the end of the piedmont, it took off. That was us on our way. So we got up to … it would be Anvers probably, got off at Anvers and transferred to the *John Biscoe*.

[0:46:12] Macrae: Now the *John Biscoe* was then detailed to take me up to the Drake Passage[7] where the Chilean ship, the *Pilato Pardo*, was going to pick me up and take me up to Ushuaia. So what actually happened was: we were in the Drake Passage and it was pretty rough and the *Pilato Pardo* was just steaming in slow circles and they sent a launch out. Now the launch went round to the lee side of the *Biscoe*; I got into the launch and then they headed back towards the *Pilato Pardo*. Now, by now the weather was getting really bad, so what actually happened was that they dropped two falls down. That's basically fore and aft hooks to put round the launch and started to lift it up. What actually happened was the forward fall came off. The launch then fell and was hanging with the bow in the water.

[0:47:33] Macrae: By this time, John Cole, the captain of the *Biscoe*, had spotted what was going on. He had swung the ship around and created a bit of a lee. They chucked a rope down, I had a rope around me and up I went. Then they rescued the two crew members and then they pulled the launch up. But it was actually quite a close thing

[7] A statement later in this interview suggests that the transfer took place in the Beagle Channel, not the Drake Passage.

because if I'd been into the sea then, I would have been in big trouble. Then it was up to Ushuaia, then flew from Ushuaia to Buenos Aires. Having been through South America previously, my Spanish was good enough to travel by and understand what was going on. Picked up by the Embassy car and then taken from the docks up to the Embassy, spent the night in the Embassy, then flew into London the following day I think it was, and hung about for months; that was somebody getting … waiting, the eye to get operated on. That was really the end of that bit of the story anyhow. But certainly it made a difference. I didn't realise just how awkward it was to adapt to not having proper full binocular vision.

[0:49:07] Lee: Is that still the case?

Macrae: It is now but I don't notice it now.

[0:49:13] Lee: Why was it so important to get you back to the UK to do the operation? Why couldn't the operation take place …?

Macrae: They had no facilities, no equipment for doing that. I mean BAS facilities were very rudimentary.

[0:49:24] Lee: What about Buenos Aires or …?

Macrae: Well again, when you are back in Buenos Aires, you might as well come to the UK. But there was another thing to happen back about from that. When I was at Fossil Bluff, Fossil Bluff was a four-man base and we had an accident. One of the lads fell over an oil drum and split his knee open. Alan Milne was the doctor in Adelaide Island and at that time the advice was 'Give him a local anaesthetic. Get a toothbrush. Scrub the wound clean and then stitch him up.' Well it was actually a pretty big wound. It split his kneecap completely, not the kneecap but the flesh in front of it and there was quite a lot of tweezer work removing the bits of gravel and stuff out of it. Paul wasn't too happy about the operational side of it. Soo get round it, we got a bottle of rum and we got half a bottle of rum into him and then gave him the local anaesthetic and stitched him up. When Alan saw it, when he came down in the plane, when the planes arrived, he was quite impressed with the job. I have actually seen the job since and I was quite impressed with the job I did at the time.

[0:51:00] Lee: Just going back to your evacuation briefly, there's a note here about the interesting occasion, interesting trip in the Beagle Channel. Was that …?

Macrae: That's the one.

[0:51:08] Lee: So the transfer took place quite close to Ushuaia?

Macrae: Oh yes. It was actually quite a close-run thing because of the weather, and had we been into the sea, it would have been quite difficult I think in the conditions to have recovered as quickly.

[0:51:25] Lee: Did you fear for your life at that point?

Macrae: Not really. You are too busy getting it … You know are too busy trying to preserve it, to worry about fearing for it.

[0:51:32] Lee: There are another couple of incidents I want to ask you about. Again back at Halley when one of the tractors fell into a crevasse in the Hinge Zone.

Macrae: That was my second field trip. No that was actually quite an interesting experience because what had actually happened was we had set off to … I think it was a depot run. At Halley Bay you'd the Brunt Ice Shelf and there was an area called the Hinge Zone where there was inland ice and the floating ice. What actually happened was the movement of the ice created crevasses and the crevasses were covered with snow. The idea was there was a staked route through the crevasses but obviously these things change all the time so what you tended to do, you would drive along. If the light was right, you would look for any signs of irregularities. You soon became able to pick them up quite quickly, mainly because you didn't want to make too many mistakes.

[0:52:27] Macrae: If you thought there was something wrong, you would get out with your ice chisel, your bog chisel, poked away to check, see what there was. What had happened was: the area we were crossing I don't think they had considered it particularly difficult to cross although there were signs of crevasses, but most of them were well bridged. Now at the time, fortunately, I was driving a Muskeg tractor and I drove across this crevasse. Now the normal wisdom was: don't drive straight in the tracks of the guy in front of you, because if you were going to weaken the bridge, the second guy would come along … But the trouble was I think the International Harvesters, they were significantly heavier than the Muskegs. The Muskegs I think would probably be about a ton, a ton and a half. The International Harvesters could be maybe three or four ton. Again I should have made a note of all this before I came.

[0:53:29] Lee: It doesn't matter. We get the gist.

Macrae: But I was looking at the mirror and I could see my tracks in the snow and I then looked again in front and I looked back and I could see a guy called Norris Riley. Norris was driving to the side of the tracks, where he should have been. And the next thing, I looked, I saw the top of the cabin in the mirror, and I thought 'What the hell is going on here?' What had actually happened was: Norris had driven over and it was very unfortunate. That particular point he had chosen to drive over was a junction of three crevasses and underneath it was like a dungeon, one of these bottle dungeons. You had it narrow at the top and widening at the bottom. Of course with the tracks going, the International Harvester just churned its way down.

[0:54:23] Macrae: Now in the top of these International Harvesters as I said there was a hatch in the roof, that was the escape hatch. Norris was up and out of that like a rocket and on the sledge at the back. What actually happened was the International Harvester dropped, the sledge jammed it and then the engine cut out. So we were then faced with a scenario: 'Well we've got a tractor down a hole, boys, so what do we do?' We had a look at it and it was obvious with the gear we had at the time, if we had moved that sledge, which we would have had to get it out, that would have went right down the hole. The next thing was 'Well, what are we going to do?' A bit of humming and hawing. I was looking in the cab and I could actually see where I was

standing over the edge of the hole. You are not stupid; you don't go straight over. You probe the edge to see where the edge of the hole is, and I could actually see Norris's camera which was a Hasselblad and I said to him 'Norris, you have left your camera down there.'

[0:55:28] Macrae: He was pretty shaken at this point. He said to me 'Oh no. I don't want it. It can stay there then.' I thought, as a Scotsman, 'Bugger that. That's too good a camera to leave down there,' So we got one of these electron ladder things, it was basically wire ladders with aluminium rungs. We dropped that down. I got a rope down myself, the idea being 'If the tractor goes; if it goes to the side, I'll go to the side, it can drop away and I will be on the rope.' I got the camera up. Norris had said to me … If he ever hears this, he probably won't remember saying it but he certainly did say to me 'Well, it's yours then.' Obviously I had a perfectly good camera at the time so I just gave it back to him, but it shows you how shock can affect someone's brain, you know.

[0:56:19] Lee: You were breaking every Health & Safety rule in the book that was yet to be written, weren't you?

Macrae: Yes. You see I disagree with this modern idea that you can legislate for everything and rules can cover everything.

[0:56:32] Lee: But common sense would have suggested you should leave it where it was?

Macrae: No.

[0:56:36] Lee: No?

Macrae: That tractor was stuck. There was a tractor, maybe two or three ton, stuck. What difference was my weight going to make to what was going on. In the grand scheme of things, it was like anything: you look at it, leave it for a bit and see what happens? Nothing happened. I was going down a ladder. I am not being foolhardy about it. I was going down a ladder, I had a rope on, had more than I would say 80% chance of surviving in any scenario. You would need to be unlucky …, so why not do it?

[0:57:18] Lee: Did you get the tractor out?

Macrae: Well, what actually happened with that tractor was: a person you are going to interview later, Gordon …

[0:57:26] Lee: Gordon Ramage.

Macrae: He will be able to tell you exactly how they got it out, but yes, they did get it out. That was a very impressive operation.

[0:57:33] Lee: There was another occasion where you very nearly went over an ice cliff.

Macrae: This was just the sort of thing that could happen, the conditions we were driving in, and it wasn't a particularly dangerous area. It was a well flagged route but it did go reasonably close to ice cliffs. Now what actually had happened was: we were travelling in not very good weather. It was a white-out; it was blowing. We could see a reasonable distance in front of us, but again a lot of the time we would just lose sight of the surface. But what we had: it was a Muskeg tractor I was driving at the time. There was another lad there, Dick Palmer; he was driving a Muskeg about 10 feet opposite me. We were driving basically side by side and we had two co-pilots with us: another couple of lads. We were sitting inside the cabs and eventually Dick, he must have looked at his watch because I think it was coming up for 7 or 8 o'clock, whenever the sched was.

[0:58:36] Macrae: So the point that the watch went, so stopped the Muskeg and was talking to, I think it was a guy, his nickname was Graunch[8], I think it was. I had said to him something about 'I will nip across and see what we are doing.' So I opened the door of the tractor and we had a thing called a crevasse frame, made of scaffolding round about it. So I was hanging on to the crevasse frame, just having a look before I jumped down, because another notorious thing was: a Muskeg will sit across a crevasse quite a thing, because it has got a far lower ground pressure than someone on foot. The idea was not to drop down straight onto the surface because we had almost lost Dick earlier on that trip with this. But anyhow I saw this what I thought was a line. I thought 'What's that line over there?'

[0:59:31] Macrae: It was just like one of these films where the curtain opens and here we were certainly no more than 60 or 70 yards, probably less, from the edge of these ice cliffs which were probably 150 feet. Had it not been for that particular sched, and had it been a complete white-out, probably at least one of us would have been into the sea, if not two of us. So all you would have had then was just a line of tracks disappearing. But that wasn't the end of it because we actually stopped the tractors and the first thing that happened: Dick's tractor had been fitted with a new electronic ignition system for that trip. They were just coming out then, and could he get the bugger to start. No, and there we were stuck in these ice cliffs, not very far from the edge, with a tractor that didn't start. But I took mine back and then came back and eventually we did get it going but that was probably the dividing line between something going wrong and something not going wrong.

[1:00:37] Lee: Having had a close call sometimes BAS changes its practices to avoid …?

Macrae: No I don't think we ever bothered reporting that. I can't honestly remember. That's the sort of thing that you'd be … I mean you obviously would not report every incident to BAS.

[1:00:52] Lee: But you were less than a hundred yards from death, weren't you?

Macrae: Yes well but every time you cross the road you are less than a hundred yards from death in the UK. It's all … you've got to balance it up.

[8] Keith Chappell.

[1:01:02] Lee: We haven't talked about Stonington. So finally, you went to Stonington for the winter of '73?

Macrae: Yes.

[1:01:08] Lee: Is there anything that stands out in your memory from your time at Stonington?

Macrae: Stonington, I didn't find it … I wouldn't say it was enjoyable as being down the Peninsula, but I didn't particularly like working with the dogs, much to my surprise.

[1:01:27] Lee: Oh really?

Macrae: Yeah.

[1:01:30] Lee: Do you know why?

Macrae: Part of it was: I didn't like the way … I mean I am aware of the way the dogs were handled. You had to handle them roughly, but I probably empathised a lot more with the dogs than I did with some of the guys. So I will leave that one at that. But Stonington actually really for me, gave me a really good end to my Antarctic career when I went back to Alexander Island with an area I had always wanted to go to at the Bluff. That was when a guy called Chris Edwards, he was geologising above the George VI Sound onto the Milky Way and the Planet Heights and all that. Alexander Island in the centre was an absolutely superb area.

[1:02:24] Macrae: I had worked there with some of the geologists and geophysicists when they had come down, when I was at the Bluff originally. There were huge sections that were not in this report, what I am telling you just now. But that was really the best time, working in Alexander Island because you had this generally good weather and magnificent scenery, and quite interesting geology as well because at that point Chris found a place called Atoll Nunatak. Double ended quartz crystals which were quite unique. I actually remember I think I spent something like four days doing very little plane tabling and an awful lot of time mining quartz crystals. That was certainly one of the highlights, I would say.

[1:03:16] Lee: What became of the crystals?

Macrae: I have still got them at home.

[1:03:18] Lee: You've got them?

Macrae: Oh yes.

[1:03:19] Lee: Marvellous. How does the Antarctic rate in the life of Malky Macrae?

Macrae: I would say it was a very interesting interlude but not anything I would have thought was terribly unusual. It was something that was like an actual progression and at the time that was the best time and I know that for years, probably between '65 and

’75, most of the blokes that were down the same time as me would say they reckon they were the best years because the system was more or less worked out. We had virtually no control from London. What London wasn’t told, they didn’t know. So we did what we did. The guys got their programmes done and we got our jollies and there was plenty of changing around. You could learn how to use a theodolite which I did. George[9], who worked on base, George was an excellent mechanic although I think since he came from the Antarctic, his skills seem to have diminished since he got married. Certainly a very interesting thing, but not I would say the defining point in my life. I have always tried to look forward, not back.

[1:04:40] Lee: It’s been great looking back though today. Thank you very much indeed.

Macrae: No problem, Chris. I hope it’s of some use to you.

[1:04:46] Lee: Absolutely. You were eloquent.

[1:04:50] [End]

ENDS

[9] George Kistruck.

Possible extracts:

- Working on tractor engines at -40C. [0:16:25]
- Visit to Halley-I. [0:19:28]
- The Lansing Snow Plane. [0:20:42]
- Unreliability of early snowmobiles. [0:25:24]
- Aurora watching from a tractor cab. [0:27:39]
- Winter visits to the penguins. [0:28:40]
- Killing seals for dogfood and research. [0:32:10]
- Eye injury from a hacksaw blade. [0:41:13]
- Medical evacuation and a tricky ship transfer. [0:44:56]
- Sorting a knee injury at Fossil Bluff. [0:49:24]
- Loss of a tractor in the Hinge Zone. [0:51:32]
- Rescue of a Hasselblad camera. [0:54:23]
- A near accident in a white-out. [0:57:33]
- Mining quartz crystals on Alexander Island. [1:02:24]