

GORDON RAMAGE

Edited transcript of a recording of Gordon Ramage interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on 28<sup>th</sup> October 2012. BAS Archives AD6/24/1/201. Transcribed by Andy Smith, 1st September 2013.

[0:00:00] Lee: This is Gordon Ramage, interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 2012.

Ramage: My name is Gordon Ramage. I was born on the 1st of June 1946 and born in Edinburgh.

[0:00:16] Lee: So I usually ask this question of all Fids but in your case there is a special reply. What was your first connection with the Antarctic and FIDS?

Ramage: Well the first connection I had was: it was opened up simply because at the time I was working as an agricultural engineer, interested in farm machinery. Through family connections I worked on a farm. I had gone to visit, didn't want to be a farmer or get involved in that. But engineering seemed to click. I liked things mechanical. As I progressed through the ranks of the agricultural company I worked for, I more or less worked on the agricultural tractor element rather than the machinery, and become more a specialist on hydraulics, transmissions and engines. As time passed by, my contact with FIDS originally was heard through ... at the time my father in his latter years, he worked in the shipyards local to Edinburgh, Henry Robb known as Robb Caledon.

[0:01:29] Lee: Down at Leith?

Ramage: In Leith, who at the time, my father said 'One of the last ships I will be working on before I retire is called the *Bransfield* or will be named the *Bransfield*, and it's heading off to the Antarctic. That was quite interesting because of all the ships that Henry Robb built, it was the one that stuck in my memory.

[0:01:54] Lee: How old would you be at that point, Gordon?

Ramage: I would be 25 at that point, because that time I had been going round farms repairing tractors on my own. It was the type of job that you were left to use your own initiative to solve the problems and almost be self-sufficient. When I heard about that ... In school days there was no mention of polar regions to any extent I could remember. It was only when my father mentioned the *Bransfield* that I read a book called *The Great White South* by Herbert Ponting and I found it quite interesting. It was so long ago now, my memory probably has slipped, to identify any particular area, but very shortly after that, probably not quite a year, I read an article in the local paper and that advertised – it was an advert placed by BAS looking for experienced tractor mechanics to work down South. It was an unusual situation and it kindled my interest, so much so that, with a connection of the *Bransfield*, and the potential for being an extraordinary job in the field that I was working with, in that extraordinary part of the world. I duly applied and invited down to London and then thereafter I was taken on to work for the Survey.

[0:03:49] Lee: So the penny dropped when you realised that the agricultural tractors you were working on in ... ?

Ramage: It was an interface between what was required and my experience filled all the boxes. The only box that was a bit unknown to Bunny Fuchs and Paul Whiteman I remember at the time, and Bill Sloman, was your ability to get on with other people.

[0:04:19] Lee: Was that probed at the interview, your psychology? Do you remember that?

Ramage: It was unknown that you were being psychologically interviewed as well as your technical ability. I felt your technical ability seemed to be the minor part of the interview. They either made enquiries without me knowing, or they had taken that as read with your qualification, City & Guilds Agricultural Engineering, and they were more interested in your personal attributes.

[0:04:57] Lee: And you applied in 1972?

Ramage: I applied for the job early part of 1971.

[0:05:07] Lee: How old were you then?

Ramage: I would be 24 at that point, and the time between first making contact, being short-listed to go down to the interview, and then there was the waiting period to sail from Southampton which was October in '71. Between being engaged with BAS, I spent a bit of time going on a couple of courses to a manufacturer of, or a modifier of equipment who was also the agent of the International builders of tractors who was based in Edinburgh, who branded a modification called the Bowen-60. It was a wide track version of the BTD-4 tractors that they had and I spent a bit of time at their premises learning how to short-circuit some complicated repairs to do with the fuel system. If in the unlikely event that they would, say, have a problem and it was too difficult to do repairs without technical calibration equipment.

[0:06:24] Lee: Did you ever have to use that knowledge?

Ramage: I never needed to use the stuff that I was trained upon. There was various other aspects of compromise and ingenuity that had to be put into place throughout my period with BAS, both at Halley Bay and Adelaide Island.

[0:06:45] Lee: Let's talk about that then, but first this extra training you had, was that off your own initiative or was that BAS sending you away?

Ramage: It was after the interview and after I was officially taken on with BAS and prior to the tractor ... to take the opportunity to walk round the tractor with the engineers that modified the tractor prior to going down South with the *Bransfield*. The *Bransfield* at that time was back for its first refit and the intention was to load the International Harvester tractor at the ship repairers as opposed to the dockside, both to hopefully eliminate the dockers' charges and that was what was done. After the training course I accompanied the vehicle on the low loader and it was loaded at Robb

Caledon. I never seen the tractor again until I joined the ship at Southampton on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October (approximately) in 1971, when I then departed.

[0:07:59] Lee: So that special training you had, was that your own idea or did BAS send you to do that?

Ramage: It was a suggestion from BAS saying ‘Is there any area that you want to be trained?’ We had previous machinery that had been purchased from a dealer in Leeds<sup>1</sup> but as International was sitting at a dealer in Edinburgh, ‘Do you need any training?’ I thought ‘Well to take advantage of the offer of getting trained ...’, rather than being a bit too smart and saying I know everything, was to take the opportunity to speak to the people that modified the tractor and find out what was different from the normal build and any areas of concern that they would have. However everything went fine. There was not a lot to learn. Whilst it was modified, it was an uncomplicated modification. It just meant the tracks were wider, longer, the blade was bigger and it didn’t cause any issue all the time I was down there.

[0:09:11] Lee: Did you go and see the *Bransfield* whilst your father was working on it?

Ramage: I didn’t, because the cross-over in time, although I did know that when he realised that I was sailing South on the *Bransfield* as opposed to the *John Biscoe*, he said that if you go up into the bridge at the time, he said ‘I built the chart tables.’ He said ‘There is no identification but it lets you know that I done my bit.’ So there we go, and then he retired the year after that. It was quite co-incidental, it was no more than that, but interesting; it was just another link in the chain.

[0:09:57] Lee: Did your father ever express an opinion as to how good a ship the *Bransfield* was?

Ramage: He said at the time that because all the ships were special ships that Robb Caledon built. They were individual. It was not a production line shipyard and all I could say: they were building this extremely well-built ship for working in ice and the design was such that it was different from other stuff. It has a heli-deck on it. There were laboratories being built, and accommodation for staff. Little did he know at the time that I was going to occupy one of the cabins on its second voyage down.

[0:10:41] Lee: Some people had difficulty in finding the *Bransfield* in Southampton because it is so small<sup>2</sup>.

Ramage: I didn’t have any problem at all because it was actually ... I was told ‘You will find it relatively easily. It is opposite Ocean Terminal where the QE2 at the time was berthed. When I arrived in Southampton, got off the train from London via Edinburgh<sup>3</sup>, asked for a taxi to take me to opposite the QE2 berth and he found it quite easily.

[0:11:25] Lee: How was it to sail in for you? Was it a decent ship?

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<sup>1</sup> Cripps.

<sup>2</sup> This was said about the *John Biscoe*, which was much smaller.

<sup>3</sup> Presumably he means from Edinburgh via London.

Ramage: It was. It was probably the first ship of any substance that I had sailed on, other than ferries to the Western Isles, to Mull, and very localised stuff. It was the first proper ship that I spent time on, and it was an experience in the fact that you were sharing your cabin with three others and that had taken a bit of getting used to – the very close environment for about three months, because it didn't reach Halley Bay where I was destined for until about the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 1972.

[0:12:09] Lee: Did it handle well at sea, or was it a bit difficult?

Ramage: I felt that the first experience going through the Bay of Biscay was 'Mm, I hope it gets better.' Fortunately it did. Then I got my sea legs and I think the next experience was crossing the Drake Passage. It was quite rough; I remember that. So rough in fact that when I went up on the top deck, the radio officer at the time who was Hugh O'Gorman (long gone I am afraid), he was feeling terribly sick at the time. I thought 'If their chief radio officer is feeling sick, there is not a lot of hope for us by the time we get to the Falkland Islands.' However that was the worst weather. There were other of course rough passages after that, going in between the Peninsula (coming back) but by that time obviously I had got my sea legs and it was fine.

[0:13:15] Lee: Had they told you where they were going to send you, before you embarked?

Ramage: I didn't realise where I was going until the very last minute, when I got information sent to say 'Please report to the *Bransfield*.' I had no indication at first, even at the Cambridge Conference, or the Briefing as it is now called, to where I was going. All I knew was: yes you were engaged as a tractor mechanic. I could have been sent anywhere and I was prepared for that. It wasn't until 3 weeks before, it said 'Please report to *Bransfield* at Southampton and you are going to Halley Bay.'

[0:14:01] Lee: What did you make of Halley Bay when you got there, because it's rather different from most of the bases, isn't it?

Ramage: Halley Bay was, it was going into the unexpected, having never been down before. It was my first visit and only visit and like all other Fids that were on board at the time, you saw it on films, you saw it on information packs, books; you read about it, but nothing could prepare you for when the ship was announced 'Halley Bay is within sight' and all you could see was the ice cliffs. For the uninitiated at the time you said 'Well where are the buildings?' Lo and behold, the buildings were about 30 feet buried under the ice shelf further in.

[0:14:57] Lee: That was the first time you realised that, was it?

Ramage: That's the first time I realised that. It was either tactfully kept from us or it was rather naive of me to overlook that, but I think when you speak to any other Fids, you will say 'That was kept till the last minute.' That was the icing of the cake.

[0:15:16] Lee: Literally?

Ramage: Very much literally. It looked like the icing on the cake. There was a band of Fids to meet us at the edge of the ice edge and prepare for tying the ship up at the deadmen that were buried to secure the forward and aft tie-downs. That was it; there was nothing to see. Eventually, when we did get up to base, all you saw as you approached it were some food dumps, the rhombic aerials, and the top of the extension shafts. And going down to base was an eye-opener.

[0:15:55] Lee: Tell me.

Ramage: To find that your home for the next, at that time it was supposed to be two years, was 30 feet to floor level. You went down an extension set of basically builders' ladders. That was an eye-opener. It was an experience. It felt like: this is an adventure, not just a job, and the rest it started to put into place what your task was for.

[0:16:31] Lee: Did you take to the troglodyte life or was it ...? You weren't claustrophobic or ...?

Ramage: I didn't find it claustrophobic at all because once you got down the shaft, you had time to think about your being claustrophobic because you didn't know what was down below. On the first time I went down the entrance tunnels and the shafts, it was totally ... You were going into an abyss. You just didn't know and then it opened up into huts, living accommodation. You soon forgot, because of the environment below the ice that exactly you were covered with thousands of tons of ice above the roof. It didn't bother me. I imagine it may bother other people but I have never met anybody that wintered at Halley base under the snow that it was a problem with them.

[0:17:26] Lee: So where were your tractors kept? Were they on the surface or were they buried as well?

Ramage: The tractors were mainly kept on the surface other than anything that was required to be kept in the garage, which again was buried under the snow, with access through a ramp. If you were doing any planned work over the winter months, you had to plan that that tractor was going to be basically immobilised for weeks or months on end, until the ramp was opened up again. So all the stuff that was kept on the surface were in workable conditions. Over the colder periods, you only tried to use one tractor and didn't use the other ones simply because it was such a long task getting them started in cold weather. For instance the tractor that was used for the Saturday gash run, you knew on the Friday that Saturday was going to follow, so you made sure that the battery charger was connected to the battery, not to charge the battery but to keep the electrolyte in a more ambient temperature and start up a pre engine heater. It could take forward planning in the coldest of weather; it may take four hours to prepare a tractor to start. You couldn't go and just put an ignition key in and hope to start the machine. That didn't happen because of the cold temperature. So it was well prepared.

[0:18:56] Lee: So tell me what you had. You had International Harvesters, which you had seen before ...

Ramage: We had International Harvesters, we had the Bombardier Muskeg tractors, we had a sledge and some small skidoos, and odd bits of plant. Most of the heavy

transport used the International tractors, including the one that came down with me from Edinburgh on the *Bransfield* (that was the replacement). And the Sno-Cat. The Sno-Cat was a Tucker Sno-Cat.

[0:19:30] Lee: How reliable were all these machines?

Ramage: They were very reliable. The only problem I had technically was the Sno-Cat. Whilst it was a good piece of kit, it had a weak point in the track support running gear. It was notorious for breaking. It was badly designed, it wasn't strong enough and it could never be used as a front line vehicle for supporting any of the scientific staff. It was just predominantly used round about base and it was eventually taken out and I believe replaced by more modern ... The engine transmission was fine; it was the actual pontoon was a problem. It differed greatly from the pontoons that were in the TAE expedition many years before. It was a very short, almost like a budget module and didn't stand up to it at all.

[0:20:31] Lee: What's a pontoon, Gordon?

Ramage: The pontoon is an individual as opposed to having on a crawler tractor where you have two continuous tracks, the Sno-Cat tractor had four individually sprung smaller tracks that allowed it to more or less claw itself along the snow as a opposed to the twin-track, the Muskeg or the International with a metal track, driving on the snow and spreading the load. The concept and idea was good, and I believe it has been very successful since, but a different re-design.

[0:21:11] Lee: But these things did go wrong, because you say in your notes that you had to resort to manufacturing your own spares.

Ramage: Oh yes, it did, and unfortunately the whole function of the mechanical backup up for the Survey, from the procurement of the equipment to the actual areas of weakness in the working environment, were such that the timescale for identifying parts, other than fast moving parts like engine oil, filters, fan belts, a couple of bits and pieces which were probably recommended from the manufacturers in the first place, it never always stacked up to what actually went wrong. And we did manufacture stuff on base that we would probably have never thought about back home in the UK at the time, it was so easy to go and order the parts from the dealer. But down in the Antarctic, to keep the machine going, you had to devise, compromise on manufacturing your own parts if and when you needed it.

[0:22:21] Ramage: We had one or two instances like the Tucker gearbox, we manufactured that because of bearing failure, and we needed a new transfer box. Well that wasn't going to happen. To get the machine mobile and usable, I dismantled the box, stripped out all the bearing casings and welded the transmission case with aluminium welding and then the inserts for the bearings, the over-size space was made up with our good old friend Araldite. Now that would never be considered in the UK. The casings would be ... 'Oh no, we can't do that. We need to replace it.' But down there, you couldn't; you had to try. If you didn't try, there was no point because at the end of the day the job was going to be stuck. If you tried and it didn't work, you had done your best and that's what mattered.

[0:23:22] Lee: But how did you know what to do, because these repairs were beyond the range of work you were doing in the field in Scotland?

Ramage: Well, it was probably because of my background and upbringing, going back to the early days in agriculture, where you were sent away to do jobs on your own. Not long after, I was still an apprentice at the time and achieved my driving licence. The company I worked with, who if you were still an apprentice would pay you low rates but go out and earn money for the company. And it was a natural skill that seemed to be there and I was quite happy doing that: left to work on your own and that's where you learned the skills to achieve the job in hand, to get it going. The farmers were very grateful, especially in the harvest time it meant money to them and if you could, not so much a bodge-up job but if you could even do a temporary job and say 'That's fine. That will keep you going. I will come back and fit a replacement part.' It didn't always work; it's inevitable that it won't, but in a lot of cases it served me good and it was these skills that I could utilise down in the Antarctic, probably more so than I could do anywhere else because of the requirement and the scope to do it.

[0:24:49] Lee: There's a phrase about 'being kept on one's mettle' isn't there?

Ramage: Very much so, yes.

[0:24:55] Lee: Were you ever stumped, or almost stumped?

Ramage: I don't know. I never had an instance where I thought, scratched my head and 'Mmm, I can't do nothing here' you know. I would always make some attempt to ... It became not so much a job, it was more of a determination to achieve a target and that was to get that piece of kit going. We had instances where a fairly new Muskeg came down. Budgetary ... for some reason allowed BAS, probably at the last minute, to buy a new Muskeg and no parts whatsoever, no spares. The machine ran reasonably well but unfortunately it ran a big end, and that was a brand new tractor that cost numerous thousands of pounds.

[0:25:56] Ramage: It was critical to the operation of the base. So what we had to do was to get it into the workshop, remove the engine, stripped it down, find out what the problem was. We had no spares so it was a case of 'What can we do? We can't not try something.' So eventually we used bits off oversized bearings and painstakingly, over a period of days, manufactured them, re-manufactured them, cut them down to size, measured up and said 'Well, this is as good as it is going to get.' We tidied up the crankshaft, put the bearing on and, lo and behold, the thing was still running when the tractor supported the relief. Eventually spares arrived to replace the engine, but the engine was still going when the replacement was there for it, so it was quite an achievement.

[0:26:56] Lee: Was this a cost to you personally? I mean did you find yourself working 24 hours a day for several days to get these things done? Were you under that kind of pressure, I suppose is my question?

Ramage: There was no great pressure because the target for the ... My remit was to look after all the equipment. The big target was to make sure everything was in running order to support any scientific expedition out in the field and offshore.

[0:27:25] Lee: The pressure was pride, was it?

Ramage: When the ship came in at relief, everything needed to be mobile, because the relief that was forthcoming was a big relief because of the rebuild at Halley, which would be Halley III at the time. I didn't feel it was a pressure. There was no time scale. I didn't feel that was an issue. It was more of a personal psychological pressure. If I tried this and it failed, it didn't look very good. The fuller picture: if that piece of kit wasn't working for the ... to support the Survey, it was a major problem, but you couldn't think of that because that would not be a ??? [incomprehensible]. You might not be able to achieve your aim if you brought that into the configuration.

[0:28:15] Lee: Did you get out into the field much, personally?

Ramage: I went out in the field two or three times. The first time was with a party to recover what remained of the Hobbits dog team, if you unfortunately on ... They were looking for a route up onto the rising in the ice called the Wright Line Recce and the dog sledge broke through a crevasse and was lost quite a considerable distance down the hole. Unfortunately all was lost. That particular trip, because there were two tractor mechanics on base, and they wanted to take a tractor out to recover what they could, it meant that ... Every time a heavy tractor left base, you needed to send an engineer, in the unlikely event there was going to be a mechanical problem. So I accompanied on a trip to the Hinge Zone to go down and look out, to dig out the remains of the dog team. We never found any dogs but we found the remains of the sledge and some personal belongings that belonged to the dog driver of the time, and recovered some stuff back to base. There were one or two personal issues, cameras that were damaged, but very little else.

[0:29:52] Lee: So it wasn't to get the dogs out? That wasn't the prime function?

Ramage: No, it was basically to go back and try and retrace the steps to mark a route and to try and recover some stuff if it was safe to do so, which was the key to anything there. It was a training trip for the other Fids that were on the trip at the same time. The second trip I done was to the N9 stake line to measure the accumulation of ice. We went out with a skidoo in that instance, just to support the glaciologist that was doing the stakes, to make sure the skidoos were running OK, and ultimately when we went up to rescue the IH tractor.

[0:30:52] Lee: Let's go back to the Hobbits, because you said the job was to do what you could do, as long as it was safe to do so, and in your case it was nearly not safe, wasn't it?

Ramage: It turned out it was a bit of a traumatic experience. It was the first time I had gone out into a field camp with the pyramid tents. We had support from the GAs. On the particular day in question where I would say it was rather a scary situation. We were taking it in relays to go down to the bottom of the crevasse where we finally located where the sledge was wedged at the bottom. It was a bottle-neck type

crevasse; it was narrow at the top for about 15 feet, opened out and then closed up again, and that's where the dog team and the sledge ... The dogs were obviously head-down. The sledge was wedged at the top. Because when the crevasse opened up, there was a lot of ... Weeks had passed and heavy snowfall, and it filled up the bottom of the crevasse. We actually had to get lowered down and dig out to find out where the sledge was, which we did and using the tractor winch, with a safety line as back-up (thankfully).

[0:32:22] Ramage: On the case that I remember quite clearly, it was my turn to go down the bottom and carry on digging to try and bring stuff back. I had done an hour or two down the bottom of the crevasse and it was time to come up. My colleague, my friend Dave Fletcher, who was at the top in charge of the tractor and the safety line. The signal was to give a pull on the safety line and be winched up with the tractor on the wire rope. There were a couple of issues with that because the wire ropes are notorious for spinning round and it started to wind the safety rope. I gave a tug with my safety rope just as I was putting the wire hawser on to the karabiner. The tractor winch got off at a great rate of knots, so quick that the end of the wire rope caught on the tip of the karabiner without being fully encased in the safety latch.

[0:33:41] Ramage: For all the tugging and shouting, the winch kept going up and up and up, probably because he didn't hear me or anything; it was too far down. But ultimately, when I did get up to the top I said 'Did you not hear me?' Dave was still singing away to his heart's content 'There's nae birdy to sing to the whale'. He seemed to think that was quite funny. I did get to the top fortunately, all safe. The safety line all tangled round the wire rope but nevertheless I got up with the karabiner still on the edge of the clip. So yes, I would say that was quite scary. If it ever came out and I dropped down, well I could always land at the top where the dogs and the sledge was. It would be a fair drop; it was over a hundred feet.

[0:34:34] Lee: Did BAS change its way of working as a result of that near miss?

Ramage: At that time I wouldn't say, because nothing seemed to change. It was left to your own ability to evaluate the situation that you were placed in at any one time. In these days it was quite a free-going attitude to achieving the task. There was no strict Health & Safety regime. You had to stand on your own two feet. You had to make your own judgements. These judgements could be for better or for worse, but you would always think twice in normal circumstances because of the environment. You couldn't escape the environment; it was all around you, and that was always an aide memoire to make you think; in most cases you was. In that particular ... yes, it was scary. It was my first experience of anything like that, but ultimately, at the end of the day, I knew I wouldn't come to great grief. There were safety lines and that's what mattered. There were safety procedures put in place. Yes, it stood you in good stead.

[0:35:53] Lee: So it didn't ban Dave Fletcher from singing then?

Ramage: No, I didn't ban Dave Fletcher from singing, and to this day we remain good friends.

[0:36:02] Lee: How were you when you got to the top? Were you shaking a bit? Were you scared?

Ramage: When I got to the top, I was sort of 'Well I have got here!' and it wasn't a case of shaking with fear; I was almost shaking with enjoyment that you actually got to the top without coming to grief. I think if the wire hawser had come off and I did fall back, it might have been a totally different situation but I was grateful. Yes we achieved something; we got there.

[0:36:46] Lee: OK. I was hearing this morning about the loss of the International Harvest tractor down a crevasse at the Hinge Zone.

Ramage: That's right.

[0:36:54] Lee: From your colleague, but then he told me it was you that got it out (Malky Macrae).

Ramage: That's correct. That's right. Malky had been involved. It was 1968/69 season. It was in a party that was going to the Hinge Zone to open up a route and take fuel for any evacuation that was required. Unfortunately the tractor, which was named Paul, broke down a crevasse. Unfortunately it was almost like a crevasse junction; it was a Y-junction. There was more than one crevasse and that was where they all intersected. The tractor went down at the worst part, the widest part: the tractor weighing probably in excess of 7 tons and a sledge, cargo sledge, full of 8 drums of aviation fuel. It was a considerable weight and the crevasse bridge couldn't take it. Both the tractor and the sledge got lost. The driver, I believe, at the time, a chap called Steve Norris<sup>4</sup>, managed to evacuate the tractor safely and escaped through the emergency hatch in the roof.

[0:38:13] Ramage: The tractor was left in the crevasse. There was no known method of getting it out. Fortunately everybody was safe. The tractor: they put the roof hatch back on and allowed the crevasse just to drift over naturally, and as far as I know, that tractor was written off; it was unrecoverable. However on a trip from Halley to the Inland Ice on a totally unrelated trip, the diesel mechanic at the time, the late Bruce Blackwell, he passed the area and there was evidence of the fuel sledge, the tail end of the cargo sledge, sticking up. He made enquiries on his return to see what was that and he read up on the history of the tractor being lost down the crevasse and devised a plan. He was a very bright, practical engineer, and eventually he put a proposal to BAS Office (that time they were transitioning between London and Cambridge). He sold the idea that he would go and recover this tractor with a team, using nothing but manual labour. There was no heavy machinery to be used whatsoever. He knew fine that London Office would not authorise the use of another International tractor or the loss of another International tractor in the hazardous zone it was. We put a plan together, worked out what sort of equipment we needed, and eventually we set off, if remember right, roughly in the month of October 1972 to try and recover this tractor. We left base with a Muskeg tractor, a cargo sledge and on the back of the cargo sledge were two skidoos. Behind the two skidoos, pulled behind the cargo sledge, there were two Nansen sledges, Nansen dog sledges with all the usual independent kit that we required: pyramid tents, nutty<sup>5</sup> boxes, etc. Wire hawsers, chain pulls, railway

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<sup>4</sup> Actually it was Norris Riley. Steve Norris was a 1975 winterer.

<sup>5</sup> Sledging rations.

sleepers and an abundance of cable and shackles, and a couple of new batteries that we hoped were going in to start this tractor.

[0:41:03] Ramage: We set off from Halley Bay and the remit was to go to the end of the drum line and depot the heavy tractor and proceed in relays with the skidoo and the Nansen sledge up to the site where the tractor was lost, that taking quite a bit of effort because the route taking you through Rosette Chasm at that time was the original route up to the Inland Ice. It had been a very chaotic area. We got to the Chasm and found the only way down with the skidoos and the sledges was to actually physically shovel the top off a wind-tail which allowed us to drive the skidoos and the Nansen sledges down to the bottom of the Chasm, and then thereafter find a route from the Chasm up onto the Inland Ice, which we managed to do. The temperature was still cold enough to allow us to do that but the time of year, it was starting to get longer days and allow the daylight for the work to continue. We eventually got to the tractor site. We had a time scale roughly about ten days to achieve our aim. By that time we would have timed out the job and had to get back to base.

[0:42:27] Ramage: The job progressed reasonably well. We located the tractor and rather than dig the snow out of the crevasse, we managed to access space at the side of the tractor and basically we were using a couple of fireman's axes. Because the time the tractor went down to the time we were there to recover it, there was accumulation of both snow and ice, and the only way you could free the tractor out from the sledge was just chip away all the ice. Ice axes were too small and they were too light. We found that a fire axe was an ideal piece of equipment to smash the ice and as you smashed the ice, it fell down to the bottom of the crevasse. We eventually freed the sledge and the tractor but the sledge was still coupled to the back of the tractor. Now to enable the tractor to be lifted out of the crevasse, we secured all the deadmen in the snow at the southern end of the crevasse and rigged up a 3-to-1 heavy duty pulley system using 3-inch wire rope. It was all secured and anchored and then we split the sledge from the back of the tractor. It allowed then the tractor to pendulum from the V position it was sitting in, to then swing around to basically vertical on the wall of the crevasse.

[0:44:14] Ramage: It was all held in place with the restraints that we had: wire ropes. Unfortunately it sat there. The sledge was pulled out of the road by a separate hand cranked system, just to clear it of the crevasse and make it safe so nothing fell back when we were working. We then proceeded to lift the tractor out of the crevasse. It was a very slow process. The idea was to hand crank the pulley block which ate through the ... It was a creeper block as opposed to a pulley block. It walked up the wire hawser rather than round a pulley.

[0:45:00] Ramage: The pace was so slow, it was taking about an hour to move an inch, this system. You had to always re-tension the fixed wire hawser just in case you lost the strain on the wire rope, and then you also had to do that when you needed take another bight at the tackle you were using. It had taken from the start to roughly the finish, pulling the tractor up onto the surface, probably about 7 days until it was actually on the surface and all the tackle was cleared off it – it was a painstaking, very dedicated, very precise job, to make sure that you never lost 'the fish that you had on the hook'. That's the only way you can describe it. You didn't want to lose it.

[0:46:01] Lee: Was it worth it?

Ramage: It was worth it on two counts. It was worth it to achieve the goal that you set out to do, was to get the tractor, to recover the tractor which was in perfect working order, and also it was an achievement both on the mechanical aspect but also on the personal context, both for working as a team and sticking with it, which was I think the important part. We learned a lot, both about each other (there were four of us on the team: Bruce Blackwell, Dave Fletcher, Ian Bury and myself) and how everybody managed to work together to achieve that aim was simply fantastic. I am sure it has been repeated in many instances with BAS since, in different aspects.

[0:47:05] Lee: Well was your achievement recognised by BAS? Did you get a message?

Ramage: We got a telegram from Bunny Fuchs saying 'Well done lads.' A sort of pat on the back, and that was it.

[0:47:18] Lee: And did the tractor start when you got it to the surface?

Ramage: The tractor: getting it out of the crevasse was like Part One or Phase One. To get it back to base was quite a task in itself. Getting it out was in some respects, looking back, was relatively easy. The tractor had to be started and bear in mind that it had been buried in the snow for a good few years, two and a half years anyway, but thankfully, due to the due diligence of previous engineers, the tractor was in top nick order. It had been basically put in the freezer. When we had taken it out, it was like taking a piece of meat out of your deep freeze. We basically thawed it out. The batteries were cracked and damaged. They had to be brought back eventually. The new batteries that we had, we fitted to the tractor and put the mobile charger that we had, just to give them a little bit of boost. We put the Webasto heater on to heat up the engine. That started fine. We ran it for about an hour, until we felt that the engine oil was suitable enough.

[0:48:35] Ramage: The tractor started without any bother, as if it had been parked the night before, and it was a great compliment to our predecessors that we had. No ??? [incomprehensible] whatsoever. It was just a standard of work that allowed us to do that. Then the next part of the operation was rather ..., again going into the unknown, because we had already crossed a very hazardous zone, albeit on skidoos. We had to get this 7-ton tractor back to what we deemed as a reasonably safe area, where the original Muskeg that brought the skidoos on that particular ... was depoted. To get it back to the base via Rosette Chasm, we devised a method which was obviously pre-planned in previous years by someone within the BAS organisation, and I suspect it might be Dad Etchells, because they had it well thought out. There was always a wooden block bolted to the back of the cab, but nobody really understood what it was for, until we discovered if you take that off, it was full of holes that were almost like four conduits from the outside. It allowed you to pass wire cables through, and what we done, we attached the wire cables to the clutch of the tractor and one to each of the steering levers.

[0:50:06] Ramage: These were attached; they were probably about 20 metres in length. We tied a big inch D-shackle to each end, and both Bruce and myself walked

the tractor almost by remote control. In fact it was; it was a very primitive rope remote control area, and followed the route back that Dave Fletcher was ahead with a bog chisel sounding out for any minor crevassing. One of the very heart thumping episodes on that trip going back, which was recollected recently to me, was the depth hoar. Anyone that travelled in the field is quite familiar with depth hoar. It's where the layers of snow have been cut with the melt and when you put weight on it, it drops down fairly suddenly. But when you are driving a 7-ton tractor over it, it is enormous. It's almost like an earthquake. It drops your whole area for about 50 metres to each side of the event, and that was terrifying and quite a loud thump sounds like thunder and you wonder what's going on. But fortunately the tractor still stayed on the surface and proceeded to Rosette Chasm.

[0:51:36] Lee: And now of course, you had a spare tractor on base, didn't you?

Ramage: Well, this was it. Just prior to that, the tractor, we got it up through the Chasm under its own steam. We pulled the winch cable out, dug a dead man in at the top, started the tractor up. We didn't feel it was safe for anybody to sit in the tractor. It was a very steep angle – almost 45 degrees, but time was running out. We had to do something to get this tractor back and we calculated the best way to do it was to start the tractor up, run the winch cable out, bury the end of the winch cable into a railway sleeper which was buried under the bondu at the top, and basically put the clutch in on the winch and the tractor winched itself up. But we calculated it would dig itself in and stall at the wind tail at the very top of the chasm. At that point we already had safety wires ready to bolt onto the tractor to hold it. We would then, yet again, use the winching equipment to pull it onto the hard surface and eventually drove it back down to base at that point. That then created an issue for the logistics at BAS, that on their books they had two Internationals, a Tucker Sno-Cat and a few Bombardier Muskegs on base, and all of a sudden, without there being a relief of base or a ship, you had an extra tractor. How the financial department dealt with that, I don't know to this day.

[0:53:21] Lee: I want to also ask you about this skidoo incident, because you hadn't been there long at Halley when ...?

Ramage: The famous skidoo incident?

[0:53:30] Lee: Yes. Now, come on. Let's have your version of the story.

Ramage: Well it was almost a joke and still currently I get called 'Ramage the Damage'. Nobody remembers all the good things you done. It's all the humorous things and I suppose that's what you live with. When I arrived at Halley Bay, it was a 24-hour relief. I was on the day shift, and relaying stuff from the ship, driving the tractor back to base. There was a squad of men, and builders, unloading all the kit. However, as a few days progressed, I noticed this skidoo (it was the first time I had seen a skidoo). It was parked up the left hand side of Third Chip and it seemed to be abandoned. I thought it was there for some reason. There was one night after dinner – bear in mind it was 24-hour daylight – I was speaking to one of the Fids on base. I said 'That skidoo down at the Chip, is there a reason for it to be there?' They said 'Oh, it won't go. There is something wrong with it. It's just been ... We will deal with it later on.'

[0:54:40] Ramage: I thought ‘Well, who is going to deal with it? There’s not anybody else.’ They were all going away so it looked like the onus was on myself. ‘That’s my first job.’ However the following day it was back to the shift as usual, but then at night time I had a I had a root around the garage to see what stuff there was. I found out what was wrong. It wouldn’t start. So I found some spark plugs and I got a lift down to the ship that night with one of the lads that were on the late shift, and duly made an attempt to get the skidoo to work. I lifted the cowl at the front as said ‘Oh, it’s a single cylinder engine.’ No surprise, not unlike a lawnmower engine or a piece of stationary plant.

[0:55:34] Ramage: I done all the checks you would do, and then before I thought ‘Ready to start it, I will do the next thing and just make sure it is out of gear.’ I checked everything. ‘Yes, it’s out of gear. The lever says it’s in neutral, the middle position, and we will have a go at starting it.’ I put on the choke and eventually got it started, and it was ticking over at a – I wouldn’t say at a fast speed. I thought ‘Right, OK. I had better progressively take to choke off or it will flood it and stop it again.’ So as I gradually opened the choke, the revs come up, come up, come up, and the transmission (it was one of these centrifugal variable transmissions that, basically the faster the engine went, the pulleys varied from small to large and then started to make an effort to move the transmission). But at that point, disaster struck, the engine revs came up and unbeknown to me, they had problems with the transmission, the small gearbox jumping out of forward gear and blatantly had wired it in forward gear. They never thought there was a need to put a skidoo into reverse.

[0:56:54] Ramage: Of course what happened is the engine revs came up, the transmission got a bit faster and then all of a sudden the skidoo started to move and I was left standing there looking at this skidoo heading towards the *Bransfield*. Of course the first thing you do is you think ‘I have got to catch this thing and stop it.’ So I tried to do a rugby tackle and hold the skidoo back but unfortunately to no avail. The skidoo picked up speed as it approached the *Bransfield* and politely cleared the gap between the top of the ice cliff and hit the *Bransfield* midships. Robbie Peck, the first bosun at the time, who was standing on the deck at the top of the gangway, and I can see his face to this day, he could not stop laughing at this machine shooting down from Third Chip, clearing the gap which was a good 25-foot gap between the particular part amidships and the side of the *Bransfield*. However the following day I was summoned to speak to Paul Whiteman who was on board at the time and I explained to him that was my first attempt at repairing anything at Halley Bay. So it didn’t go down too well but they still kept me on.

[0:58:08] Lee: We have only got a few minutes left now and I want to talk a bit about Adelaide. You were transferred there the following season? Was that your request?

Ramage: The move to Adelaide was totally unplanned. That came about at the end of my first year, which would be the year that all the equipment was brought down for the build of Halley III. The first of the Armco design. During the first or second week (it was a long relief) I met up with the tractor mechanic that was destined to go to Adelaide, a chap called Dick Walker. Dick had been with BAS briefly before. He was down at Adelaide and had to be evacuated along with another Fid, for medical reasons. He had got over his issues and had re-signed with BAS and wanted to come back down to a different base but the only slot they had for him was: ‘Yes, you can

come back as a tractor mechanic, but Adelaide is where you will be going.’ Of course he didn’t want to particularly go to Adelaide, short as it was. He had other reasons, only known to him why he didn’t want to go to Adelaide, but he committed himself.

[0:59:32] Ramage: However he grasped the opportunity to say to me ‘How long are you down for? Are you coming back down with BAS?’ which tended to be the general conversation with anyone that had been down before. I said ‘Well I can only see myself staying another one year.’ because the type of work that I was doing with tractors, where my interest was ... I basically couldn’t afford, technically, to be away from it too long because at that point of time, the ‘70s, agricultural tractors were developing at such a rate. If you were a year out or two years out, you would miss out on the training, the technicalities. So I had to make that decision, that I was only going to be with BAS for one other year. He put the position, he says ‘Well, I tell you ...’ (Bunny Fuchs and Paul Whiteman and I think Bill Sloman were actually down on the Bransfield to see the build of the start of Halley III). He said ‘How do you fancy if we put it to them to change, swap over? You go to Adelaide and I will stay at Halley.’ I said ‘Well yes. OK, that’s fine.’ So he duly asked the question. They obviously ran it past themselves and said ‘Well we don’t see a problem.

[1:00:48] Ramage: One tractor mech, he has not got a fixed scientific programme to stick to. It was probably if any, one of the more flexible jobs to be able to do an exchange, a swap with. And that’s what happened. It was fortunate for myself in some respects because it allowed me in my second year to exploit other avenues of basically being self-sufficient, looking after both the generating plant and the tractors, the skidoos. And the plus point was that it was always an aircraft support base and it was an excellent place. It made a difference that your accommodation was above ground instead of below ground. The local area environment was, I have got to say, more scenic. It had the mountains, the ice piedmont. The aircraft instilled ... I think for everybody on base, when the aircraft were down from Canada on the ferry flights, for working in the field, it was an added bit of excitement, there was no doubt about it. It gave us the opportunity to fly, which I would never have experienced without working with BAS.

[1:02:05] Lee: So it was a good year, was it?

Ramage: I would say it was a good year, a very good year, both personally and I would like to think it was a good year for the Survey as well.

[1:02:14] Lee: How was the base socially? Was it a unified base or was there any division?

Ramage: The difference between the two, between Halley and Adelaide?

[1:02:26] Lee: No, I am thinking once you got to Adelaide, were there any social problems on base?

Ramage: No. The big difference that I found was that ... We got on very well. Comparing the two, there were about 16 Fids at Halley the year I was there<sup>6</sup>. It was

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<sup>6</sup> Actually 22 Fids wintered at Halley in 1972.

quite a busy base, with lots of projects going on, whereas Adelaide was more of a, I wouldn't say claustrophobic, but the actual personal contact ... There was a chance to be more unavoidably personal with each person because you were so close. It was almost like living with seven wives and you got to know their good points and you certainly got to know their pernicky bad points, And so that would be likewise for them. I think in general, everybody had their moods, unavoidable, inevitable. The camaraderie with some, you bound more with others just by the nature of your job. The radio operator and the cook: since I left BAS, I kept in touch with them. They had a common denominator bond between them.

[1:03:49] Lee: What was the leadership like? Because they were experimenting by bringing somebody from BAS HQ to be the base leader, weren't they?

Ramage: Well I felt the base leadership was, I think I would describe it as slightly weak, in the sense of inexperience and ... The BC at the time, I think he was a decent enough person but he lacked I would say the respectability that was probably due him. Everyone tried their best but it was very difficult; not what you would expect of a leader. It was more of a ... I dare say coming through the ranks as he did, he was more of an administrator than a leader with the previous polar experience. Most BCs that I had met before had some experience and this particular BC didn't have any at all. It was almost like he was flung in the deep end and make something of it. It was fortunate because the other Fids on base and their own ability to stand alone.

[1:05:01] Ramage: My own previous experience, with spending a year at Halley, we managed to do our own thing and didn't need to rely too much on the BC for direction. We all had a task; it was self-explanatory what you had to do. I had to look after the generating plant. I had to look after the tractors. You had to make sure that the machinery was fuelled up and you had to take your turn doing the base gash rota. You had to take your turn doing the cooking. You didn't need the BC to tell you what these jobs ... You needed to fill the melt tank. You went into automatic mode, and I would say at that particular time, the other Fids on base thought the same way, they done their own thing and it made probably light work for the BC, which had to be a good thing for him<sup>7</sup>.

[1:05:54] Lee: When you came back to Britain, did you bring back skills with you that you didn't have when you went South, that were useful in your later career?

Ramage: I think what BAS brought back was: the skills were probably there but BAS would bring out the best in you. It gave you the opportunity to develop. You needed to compromise in some situations. I had already said about making some spares, that you would never get, you would never ever think of doing these things back home, but because I had previous experience doing minor things in the agricultural business, and the freedom to do that, it allowed you to expand your own abilities – abilities that were in there somewhere, but you needed the opportunity to bring them out. And that was the good thing about BAS, both your own skills and your personality, how to get on with people. And that surprised me, that you could get on with so many people and to this day, many Fids I have known, from the ship's captains to crew members, other Fids on different bases, how they all respect each other for what they do and do well.

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<sup>7</sup> The BC (Andy Smith) also had his own full-time scientific programme.

[1:07:29] Lee: And of course forty years later, you are still getting on with them, aren't you?

Ramage: Forty years. We are still doing it, we are still going to reunions. We still reminisce, we still have slide shows, we still criticise, and it is almost like you are in a time warp, but everybody has got a bit older and unfortunately some of them are no longer here to tell the story. I hope that any of these interviews, that somebody in the future will learn something from it, and appreciate it.

[1:08:00] Lee: I hope so too. In the meantime, Gordon, thank you very much indeed.

Ramage: Thank you Chris, for having me.

[1:08:07] [End]

ENDS

Possible extracts:

- 'Where are the buildings?' [0:14:01]
- Inadequacy of the Sno-Cat. [0:19:30]
- Manufacturing spare parts. [0:21:11]
- Anxious moment in a crevasse. [0:32:22]
- Retrieving a lost tractor. [0:42:27]
- Remote control tractor driving. [0:50:06]
- The famous skidoo incident. [0:53:21]