

CYRIL 'PIDGE' PALMER

Edited transcript of a recording of Cyril 'Pidge' Palmer interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee in Hove on 1st February 2013. BAS Archives reference AD6/24/1/1211. Transcribed by Dawn Sutcliffe on 3rd August 2016

[Part 1 0:00:00] Lee: This is Cyril 'Pidge' Palmer interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 1st February 2013. 'Pidge' Palmer part one.

[Part 1 0:00:13] Lee: If you want to stop at any time just say. The first question is always the toughest. I need your name and your place and date of birth please

Palmer: Cyril Hugh Palmer, 27th May 1929, Salford Lancashire

[Part 1 0:00:30] Lee: So how old are you now?

Palmer: 83

[Part 1 0:00:34] Lee: Where did 'Pidge' come from?

Palmer: When I was at school, originally because of my size they nicknamed 'Squibs' which went to 'Squidge' and then to 'Pidge' and that stuck

[Part 1 0:00:50] Lee: So you went into FIDS with a name in place did you?

Palmer: Yes

[Part 1 0:00:55] Lee: Would you say your father was an educated man?

Palmer: Yes

[Part 1 0:01:03] Lee: What was his profession?

Palmer: He was in the Navy

[Part 1 0:01:10] Lee: Does that mean you didn't see much of him?

Palmer: During the war I didn't see him for 3 years at one stage. Of course I was evacuated during the war to Lancaster. He was away quite a lot.

[Part 1 0:01:30] Lee: What did he rise to? What rank?

Palmer: He was a master gunner, like the Sergeant Major in the army or Company Sergeant Major

[Part 1 0:01:46] Lee: So he would have been on the equivalent of the front line at some point would he?

Palmer: Oh yes

[Part 1 0:01:51] Lee: Do you remember the ship he was on?

Palmer: No. He was on Arctic convoys as well during the war I recall.

[Part 1 0:02:04] Lee: What was it like back home at that time?

Palmer: I wasn't home, I was evacuated to Lancaster.

[Part 1 0:02:12] Lee: What do you remember of that period Pidge?

Palmer: It was quite happy actually. I was fortunate in getting nice people to live with. They didn't have any children and I stayed with them until I left; I got a scholarship to Lancaster Grammar and I stayed with them until I got my school cert, then went home to Salford.

[Part 1 0:02:46] Lee: Had you got thoughts of going into further education?

Palmer: No, I wanted to go to sea

[Part 1 0:02:52] Lee: You did, like your Dad?

Palmer: Yes, but not in the Royal Navy, in the merchant service

[Part 1 0:03:01] Lee: So what was the next step in your career then, or the first step in your career?

Palmer: I went to radio college in Manchester and got my, it's called the 2nd class PMG, Post Master General certificate. I got a job with Blue Funnel in Liverpool

[Part 1 0:03:26] Lee: Actually at sea?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 1 0:03:29] Lee: What was your first ship?

Palmer: It was an ex Liberty ship called *The Samoa*. When the Americans built all the Liberty ships they gave them all the names 'Sam' something so they were always called 'Sam' boats. They were built quite quickly during the war to supply stuff to the UK.

[Part 1 0:04:01] Lee: So what's a Liberty ship then? I've not come across this phrase before

Palmer: That's what they were called Liberty ships, on the American programme.

[Part 1 0:04:12] Lee: It's a class of ship?

Palmer: Yea. They were all very similar like that one there. That was my first ship. Then they got a better and bigger class called the Victory ships which were bigger and faster

[Part 1 0:04:36] Lee: Bigger tonnage?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 1 0:04:40] Lee: And you were in the radio room were you?

Palmer: Yes

[Part 1 0:04:44] Lee: How do you take to learning the art of radio, learning morse [code] and all the other quite technical material you have to cope with when you're a radio man?

Palmer: I can't answer that [laughs]

[Part 1 0:04:59] Lee: Did it come naturally?

Palmer: I imagine so yes.

[Part 1 0:05:04] Lee: What were your duties then? What was your job?

Palmer: Keep a radio watch. We did a 4 on, 4 off regime

[Part 1 0:05:19] Lee: We're talking about the late 40's now with this?

Palmer: Yes, '47 on

[Part 1 0:05:25] Lee: So you didn't do National Service then?

Palmer: No

[Part 1 0:05:27] Lee: This exempted you I presume, did it?

Palmer: Yea, but after I came back from FIDS they sent me call up papers.

[Part 1 0:05:40] Lee: Did you go?

Palmer: No, I explained what I'd been doing and they excused me.

[Part 1 0:05:48] Lee: I think at that time working for FIDS did actually eliminate your need to go to National Service, didn't it?

Palmer: I think so yea

[Part 1 0:05:56] Lee: I think so yea. One or two Fids got caught out because they didn't make the arrangements before they went, and like you got call up papers when they came back. Were you happy with Blue Funnel?

Palmer: Yes it was quite good. They were a good company to work for. When I joined FIDS the company said I could have leave off pay and keep my seniority until I came back.

[Part 1 0:06:30] Lee: And did you?

Palmer: No I joined another company, Union Castle

[Part 1 0:06:37] Lee: Why did you apply then to FIDS Pidge?

Palmer: I was in Melbourne and the ships doctor was Australian, and we were in Melbourne for 3 months because the Dockers were always on strike in those times in Australia. I had a girlfriend who had a small hotel. Staying at the hotel was a major and his wife on loan to the Australian army and he worked in St Kilda Barracks. I was familiar with the ex-inspector of the Australian government's radio inspector who had retired but because of all the strikes he'd taken a temporary job as a tally clerk. He introduced himself to me, brought the magazines, the radio officer's magazines for Australia, and in it there was an advert for the ANARE wanting radio operators. I mentioned it to this major chap and he said 'I'm in the next office in St Kilda Barracks to Phillip Law' who was running the ANARE at the time.

[Part 1 0:08:17] Lee: ANARE is?

Palmer: Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition

[Part 1 0:08:22] Lee: OK

Palmer: And he said 'would you let me have a word with him?' So he did that and it was fortunate, I had the interview, they accepted me for Macquarie. Of course I had to get to the UK and back again in time. The company said they would give me passage back on my ship but on the way home I wasn't too good and the doc said 'I'm going to give you a full medical'. He said 'I think you've got sugar diabetes' He said he couldn't give me the proper tests until I got back. By the time the results of the test came through which were negative, my ship had sailed and so I couldn't get back in time to join ANARE. I wrote to Phillip Law and he suggested that I contact FIDS which I did and got accepted by them of course. I had an interview at the crown agents

[Part 1 0:09:35] Lee: Do you remember that interview at all? A long time ago

Palmer: Not really, I thought it was quite short. I think her name was Barbara Wells. I can't remember much about it no.

[Part 1 0:09:57] Lee: Did you get the sense that it was a formality and that looking back on it, you already had the job before you walked in?

Palmer: I think so yea

[Part 1 0:10:05] Lee: Unless you mess it up I suppose

Palmer: Because of the qualifications really.

[Part 1 0:10:10] Lee: They were looking for radio ops. You'd already been accepted by the Australian equivalent so you can't have been that bad. What was it that made you want to apply to go to the Antarctic?

Palmer: I never wanted to drive a train or anything; I always wanted to go to the Antarctic simple as that

[Part 1 0:10:32] Lee: Always?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 1 0:10:35] Lee: Can you remember where that spark came from then?

Palmer: Reading Scott's books and Shackleton who was my particular hero.

[Part 1 0:10:48] Lee: This was as a boy was it, school boy reading?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 1 0:10:51] Lee: Scott doesn't have a happy ending though does it? But Shackleton you took to him as well?

Palmer: Yes

[Part 1 0:11:01] Lee: If I just push you a little bit further on this, what was it about those books those stories that inspired you? Bravery?

Palmer: Oh, I don't think so no. They were brave oh yes!

[Part 1 0:11:20] Lee: I don't mean you Pidge! [laughs] Was it just the whole concept of going somewhere so different?

Palmer: Yes. Not many other people had done of course

[Part 1 0:11:35] Lee: Especially in 1955

Palmer: I went '54 to '57

[Part 1 0:11:44] Lee: '54 you set off?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 1 0:11:46] Lee: How did you get south?

Palmer: On the *Biscoe*

[Part 1 0:11:48] Lee: How was that?

Palmer: Alright yea

[Part 1 0:11:57] Lee: It was quite a small ship compared to what you were used to

Palmer: Yea we were bunked up in ... quite different now. I came home on the *Shackleton* and that was completely different

[Part 1 0:12:12] Lee: In what respect?

Palmer: You had a separate cabin for a start. Instead of the mess on the *Biscoe*, I think the bunks were 3 high and there were 20 odd of us in this small space

[Part 1 0:12:33] Lee: Was it a friendly ship? Did you get on?

Palmer: Yea, yea

[Part 1 0:12:36] Lee: I guess you were making contact with people who were in the same position as you, going south for the same reason?

Palmer: Yes, and I was also friendly with the radio officer on the ship, and I used to do some of his watches occasionally.

[Part 1 0:12:53] Lee: Was that out of curiosity or just giving him time off?

Palmer: Just spell off

[Part 1 0:13:03] Lee: Do you remember Port Stanley?

Palmer: Yes

[Part 1 0:13:06] Lee: What do you recall?

Palmer: A village type place that (...)

[Part 1 0:13:17] Lee: People say it looked very Scottish

Palmer: Well I don't know what Scotland's like so I couldn't (...) I've been there just to the airports that's all.

[Part 1 0:13:37] Lee: At what point did you learn where you were going to go in the Antarctic?

Palmer: At Stanley

[Part 1 0:13:47] Lee: They divided you up at that point? And you were being sent to Deception Island?

Palmer: Right

[Part 1 0:13:52] Lee: Which is not quite the Antarctic is it really?

Palmer: No

[Part 1 0:13:55] Lee: Was that a disappointment?

Palmer: It was a disappointment yea. I was made Base Leader by what was his name the governor Sir Miles?

[Part 1 0:14:06] Lee: Clifford

Palmer: Clifford. I remember he had a saying 'you don't have to be scruffy to be tough'. When we built Danco we had a plaque made out and on it was 'you don't have to be tough to be scruffy' [laughs]

[Part 1 0:14:31] Lee: Did he have a sense of humour Clifford?

Palmer: No I don't think so. Of course we didn't have much contact with him anyway, just a brief contact

[Part 1 0:14:43] Lee: I was intrigued to learn to know why you were made Base Leader. Do you know? Because you'd not been before had you?

Palmer: No. I don't know, I suppose I shone out over the rest [laughs]

[Part 1 0:15:05] Lee: Perfect answer! Was it an onerous position to have, on a small base?

Palmer: No. It was a bit annoying really; Paperwork, and having to mess about with stores. It was alright

[Part 1 0:15:24] Lee: Bit of extra money wasn't it?

Palmer: Yea there was. Ten pounds a year was it? I can't remember. It was slightly more. I think the pay was about £1 a day in those days. I don't think it was much more than £360 a year. So the extra £10 was (...)

[Part 1 0:15:52] Lee: But it was worth having was it?

Palmer: Yea of course

[Part 1 0:15:57] Lee: How did you get to Deception?

Palmer: On the *Biscoe* again

[Part 1 0:16:01] Lee: Talk me through going in to Deception Island. What did you see and hear and experience? You were on the ship and you were going towards Deception Island, can you remember the process of arriving?

Palmer: No just calling in over bases and offloading their supplies

[Part 1 0:16:31] Lee: And when you got to Deception itself, the name gives it away doesn't it, it's difficult to see how to get in. Were you impressed with the arrival?

Palmer: Yes

[Part 1 0:16:41] Lee: Tell me about it

Palmer: The fact that there was already a base hut there, quite old of course. Glad to be there in fact, eventually

[Part 1 0:17:03] Lee: Did you ever get a sense of why you were there, because there was no flying at that time? Later it was used as an aircraft base wasn't it for overwintering for aircraft. But in your time in '55 before the aircraft, why do you think Britain was so keen to put men on that base?

Palmer: Part of the claim to that sector of the Antarctic against the Chileans and the Argentinians. Of course there were Chilean and Argentinean bases at Deception

[Part 1 0:17:37] Lee: So you were aware of the political underscore?

Palmer: Oh yes. As base leader I was given Protests to hand to any foreigner that came round our part of the woods and they'd give you one back and you'd have a party.

[Part 1 0:18:00] Lee: What were the protests, what did they say these notes?

Palmer: They hadn't had permission to be on Her Majesty's territory.

[Part 1 0:18:13] Lee: They gave you one back in Spanish presumably?

Palmer: Right yea

[Part 1 0:18:16] Lee: Which you could or couldn't read?

Palmer: Couldn't [laughs]

[Part 1 0:18:20] Lee: How did you get on with the South Americans?

Palmer: Oh very friendly indeed, especially the Chileans

[Part 1 0:18:28] Lee: Why is that?

Palmer: I don't know, we used to visit each other occasionally and you'd get the odd ship coming in of course besides the *Biscoe*. Of course they were all military people.

[Part 1 0:18:50] Lee: Well that was the big difference wasn't it? You wanted to be there, in theory

Palmer: They were posted there and they got triple pay and medals for being there. And they didn't do anything either. They were just there.

[Part 1 0:19:07] Lee: What did you do?

Palmer: Well we had like a small survey programme and I forget his name now, although he wasn't a geologist he had a bit of a geological programme

[Part 1 0:19:30] Lee: Shall I look him up? That's interesting there's no geologist here

Palmer: Oh no, he wasn't a qualified geologist. He was given a programme that was all.

[Part 1 0:19:46] Lee: Clarke, Cooper, Gilpin, McDowell, Fibs

Palmer: Clarke

[Part 1 0:19:51] Lee: The Met man?

Palmer: He was a Met man but McDowell was the main Met man. Ray Cooper was the diesel Mech and the other four were all Met assistants, or that was their title.

[Part 1 0:20:16] Lee: So the geology was a bit of a side line was it?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 1 0:20:20] Lee: Was Clarke just collecting samples or what was he doing? Collecting rock samples?

Palmer: Yea and he was doing fauna, flora and stuff like that; he had this little programme. I think he was either going to University or was in a break at University as a geologist

[Part 1 0:20:54] Lee: Would that be an official programme then sanctioned by FIDS or be just him doing it off his own...

Palmer: No, no he was doing it with FIDS approval.

[Part 1 0:21:04] Lee: So the main job then was Meteorological work?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 1 0:21:09] Lee: That's why you were there apart from raising the flag. Tell me about that then, what were they doing?

Palmer: Who?

[Part 1 0:21:21] Lee: The Met men

Palmer: Just met observations

[Part 1 0:21:27] Lee: Do you remember anything in particular that they were doing?

Palmer: No, just their job

[Part 1 0:21:39] Lee: I've got your report here

Palmer: Oh really

[Part 1 0:21:42] Lee: Annual General Report Deception Island 1955 by CH Palmer. At least I've got part of it. What sings out from this is just what a terrible state the base was in. What do you remember?

Palmer: It was alright, it was comfortable but not (...) The wind wasn't whistling through the windows or anything. It was in a dilapidated condition; we tried to repair places

[Part 1 0:22:25] Lee: You did a lot of work on it I think, judging by this 'The main hut on the north side is in extremely bad condition. The outer wall is bulging outwards to reveal several places where there is extensive rotting. Sections of rotted wood were knocked out, the holes filled in with cotton whey soaked in bitumastic and covered with ruberoid roofing felt. The rot is so extensive however that this patching was not continued as it was thought that it may weaken the structure.' And you hadn't got the proper tools or the timber available. This is you in 1955. So it really was a mess was it?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 1 0:23:13] Lee: So did you set about trying to improve it for future years or for yourselves? What was the thinking?

Palmer: Oh yes, yes for those people who were coming next. Ray Cooper the diesel mech, he was a really good hand. He's ex RN Stoker¹. He'd been in the naval climbing team in fact. He was a really tough good hand. He went to Canada after we left and he was a good electrician, a good mechanic and he got a dog team and was going round the Arctic repairing people's generators and electrical things; married an Eskimo lady eventually, never came back to the UK. He asked me if I'd like to go out there and join him but no.

[Part 1 0:24:29] Lee: What do you recall of the other chaps? McDowell, do you remember him particularly?

Palmer: Yep

[Part 1 0:24:34] Lee: What do you make of him?

Palmer: Nice, very efficient. He was Met office, real Met office chap. The others were recruited as Met assistants but they hadn't been with the Met office at all. McDowell nice chap

[Part 1 0:25:00] Lee: Brian Gilpin?

Palmer: They were all good

[Part 1 0:25:12] Lee: So did you all get on ok?

Palmer: Oh yea

[Part 1 0:25:15] Lee: And did you find yourself as Base Leader having to make any tricky decisions or deal with any tricky situations?

Palmer: No, not at all. I was surprised that we did get on so well

[Part 1 0:25:29] Lee: Do you put that down to the selection process?

Palmer: No, it's a bit haphazard isn't it?

¹ Royal Navy (RN) Stoker is a Marine Engineering mechanic

[Part 1 0:25:37] Lee: So just luck really?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 1 0:25:40] Lee: Possibly also the fact that you all knew you were there for a year, really you couldn't afford not to get on

Palmer: That's right

[Part 1 0:25:49] Lee: I'm reading more about your report here. There were several window frames missing which you had to repair. And you built a settee? Tell me about that

Palmer: There again Ray was the instigator of that. We got some timber from packing cases and things and we found a load of canvas. One of the rooms we turned into a bar and built this settee for (...) I've got the photograph of it somewhere. The Chileans and the Argentineans came to party we had for the first time to christen the settee.

[Part 1 0:26:45] Lee: 'A small bar and shelves were constructed in one corner of the sitting room with a 6 foot by 3 foot settee built from old crates and packing cases. This was stuffed with an old tent and wooden shavings and the hole covered with canvas and then painted'. Not exactly IKEA is it? [laughs] Was it comfy?

Palmer: Yea, great!

[Part 1 0:27:09] Lee: How did you keep that living room warm?

Palmer: Did we have a stove in there? I can't remember actually.

[Part 1 0:27:23] Lee: Shall I prompt you? 'A stove was placed in the room fitted with a temporary insulated steel sheet chimney made at the base'. You must have made the chimney. 'This however was not entirely successful and it is suggested that a new one is installed when the new stores arrive'. I guess it didn't draw terribly well?

Palmer: No

[Part 1 0:27:45] Lee: Do you remember being cold or was it ok?

Palmer: No, it was reasonable.

[Part 1 0:27:51] Lee: And you were doing photography as well obviously because you've got pictures

Palmer: Yea

[Part 1 0:27:56] Lee: Developing them on the base?

Palmer: Yes

[Part 1 0:27:59] Lee: Was that a skill you had before you went?

Palmer: No but it became very difficult when we were at Danco of course because we didn't have any electricians. We didn't have a generator but you're still going on with Deception are you?

[Part 1 0:28:29] Lee: Well it doesn't matter. There was no generator at Danco?

Palmer: We did get a generator. We had 3 wind generators and Lucas as you probably know make an established wind generator that had been used as standby on the bases for years. But this was a new type so we erected the first one and there's a photograph there.

[Part 1 0:27:59] Lee: It looks rather flimsy?

Palmer: Yea. As you probably know after a certain wind speed they're supposed to furl² and stop working so they don't burn out. Well that mechanism didn't work on the first one and it burnt out. So we put the second one up and the same, the next strong wind we had it burnt out. Put the third one up and it happened again; all three burnt out. So we had no way of charging our batteries.

[Part 1 0:27:36] Lee: At Danco?

Palmer: At Danco. That meant that Fred Wooden who was a very keen photographer, in the loft we built a little room and we used to develop the photographs by Tilley lamp. That was Fred Woodens, he did that. We'd take occasionally a battery to the nearest Chilean base, get it charged up. You know that we had one bottle of gin, lime juice and whisky per year per man? And I think it was half a gallon of rum, uncut rum, navy rum. So we used to take a bottle of that with us to get the

² Furling is one method of preventing a wind turbine from spinning too quickly by turning the blades away from the direction of the wind. If the wind is too strong then a turbine can spin so fast it destroys itself.

battery charged and we'd get a case of Argentinean or Chilean wine in return for that [laughs]

[Part 1 0:31:01] Lee: This is at Danco. How did you run a base with no effective generators?

Palmer: Well we just got on with it. I had a peddle generator for communication but I didn't do much of that because it meant somebody sitting there peddling while I was on the key. So we made it known that we wouldn't be making regular communication.

[Part 1 0:31:33] Lee: But would you have lights in the evening at Danco?

Palmer: No. We had Tilley lamps of course

[Part 1 0:31:46] Lee: I forget what the science was you were doing at Danco. Was there any science going on there?

Palmer: We had a geologist and Fred Wooden of course the surveyor, and John Kettley.

[Part 1 0:31:58] Lee: So there's no scientific science? So they didn't need the power?

Palmer: No

[Part 1 0:32:04] Lee: So you got away with it I suppose. I hadn't realised that thank you, that's really interesting

Palmer: I don't even know if they supplied a generator for the second year after we left. I don't think so. I don't know what they did.

[Part 1 0:32:23] Lee: Back at Deception, there's a word in your report I didn't understand called a vibrovertor. Does that ring any bells with you?

Palmer: No. What was that about then?

[Part 1 0:32:46] Lee: Well that's what I am asking

Palmer: Was that in my report?

[Part 1 0:32:54] Lee: Yea

Palmer: Oh, interesting. Sounds sexy doesn't it? [laughs]

[Part 1 0:33:03] Lee: I don't think it was [laughs]. Were you worried about fire at all at Deception?

Palmer: Worried?

[Part 1 0:33:10] Lee: Yea

Palmer: Yea, if it happened yea, yea

[Part 1 0:33:15] Lee: So what precautions did you take to avert it?

Palmer: We just used to take care with everything, and know where the various buckets of sand were

[Part 1 0:33:34] Lee: You did quite a lot of reorganisation of the fire precautions; repositioning extinguishers and buckets of sand. There's quite an interesting passage about recommending that anti-freeze be added to the water tanks because you were fearful that the tanks might freeze up in the winter and therefore you couldn't fight a fire with lumps of ice. Remember that?

Palmer: Yes

[Part 1 0:34:05] Lee: Did you do much sledging at Deception?

Palmer: Not a great deal but we had dogs of course

[Part 1 0:34:14] Lee: Seven I think, is that right? Tell me about that

Palmer: We just used to do what we could with them. Ray Cooper again looked after the dogs, he was very good

[Part 1 0:34:34] Lee: Would you get far?

Palmer: No, no

[Part 1 0:34:41] Lee: Was there much snow to sledge on?

Palmer: Yes

[Part 1 0:34:50] Lee: Would you go sledging yourself?

Palmer: Yes

[Part 1 0:34:54] Lee: How did you take to that yourself?

Palmer: Difficult

[Part 1 0:34:59] Lee: Difficult, can you elaborate?

Palmer: I don't know what to say really.

[Part 1 0:35:12] Lee: Why was it difficult?

Palmer: Initially, but then you got used to it, controlling the dogs. None of us had any experience, but it was a lot of fun as well.

[Part 1 0:35:35] Lee: You say you had no experience but in fact all six of you on Deception Island that year, none of you had been south before

Palmer: No

[Part 1 0:35:43] Lee: Was that a disadvantage not to have any old hands in the team?

Palmer: I think so yea

[Part 1 0:35:49] Lee: So what kind of problems did that throw up the fact that there was no experience on the base?

Palmer: I can't think of any at all

[Part 1 0:36:02] Lee: Did you feel confident about running a base with amateurs effectively?

Palmer: Yea. They're all good hands

[Part 1 0:36:15] Lee: One of your jobs was to maintain the lighthouse wasn't it?

Palmer: Yea, I can't remember much about that.

[Part 1 0:36:24] Lee: Do you remember the radio gear? Tell me about that

Palmer: Oh yeah oh. Ex naval stuff, CR300 I think was the name of the type of receiver. The transmitter was a huge thing about 6 foot tall; an ancient valve driven transmitter of course. None of your transistors in those days.

[Part 1 0:37:10] Lee: How far could you reach?

Palmer: I had an amateur licence anyway and so I used to talk to people all over the place especially Chile. VP8/BH was my call sign. In fact I've got one of them there.

[Part 1 0:37:33] Lee: Could you reach Britain?

Palmer: Oh yea

[Part 1 0:37:36] Lee: So you were speaking to people in this country?

Palmer: Oh yea

[Part 1 0:37:39] Lee: Some of the bases they use that as an unofficial way of talking to relatives. Tell me about that

Palmer: We didn't do that, I just communicated with other hams

[Part 1 0:37:53] Lee: But could you pass messages to your folks back home?

Palmer: Yea. If you were in contact with someone and it was probably near one of the chaps you'd say 'would you mind giving them a phone call and saying every things ok' and things like that.

[Part 1 0:38:15] Lee: You were mentioning in your radio report of that year that the batteries were well past what we now call their sell by date. 'These batteries are all manufactured in 1949 and clearly marked, expected storage life 9 months. And here we are in 1955. So was the gear reliable or were you being let down a lot?

Palmer: No it worked all the time. I was very lucky. There were no facilities to test any equipment really if it had gone down so I was quite lucky.

[Part 1 0:38:55] Lee: No repair facilities you mean.

Palmer: We had no stand by gear either if the main transmitter had gone. We'd have had no means of communication at all.

[Part 1 0:39:09] Lee: How important was the radio?

Palmer: Very, yea

[Part 1 0:39:15] Lee: So the fact that there was no standby was a bit risky was it? I guess you were sending Met figures back to Stanley. What else was it being used for?

Palmer: That's all, just the Met reports really. When the aerial survey people came

[Part 1 0:39:38] Lee: Hunting's?

Palmer: Yea, the equipment they had, international radio was running in the radio station. In fact George Ghetiday[phonetic] was the chap in charge. I met him in Tripoli in Libya when I started flying for Silver City I was in Libya for 3 years and he was running the IAL station there. Jim Greenshields, one of the Canso pilots when I was in Chittagong flying for Pakistan-Shell; a survey aircraft landed one day when we just landed, and we went across to have a word with the crew to see if they knew anything, were they staying or are they in transit, and Jim Greenshields was one of the pilots on that aircraft.

[Part 1 0:40:42] Lee: He was a Hunting's man was he?

Palmer: He was a Hunting's man

[Part 1 0:40:44] Lee: So when did Hunting's arrive there at Deception?

Palmer: When? Just before I left to go to Danco, and I didn't get on with Mott of course

[Part 1 0:40:59] Lee: You didn't?

Palmer: No, because he came ashore 'Right I'm in charge here now!' [laughs] So we didn't get on too well.

[Part 1 0:41:13] Lee: Can you elaborate on that? Can you give me examples?

Palmer: He wanted to take over everything. There was an emergency hut away from the main building and we opened that up for him for the radio station. They had some porta cabins as I remember. And we let him use our kitchen which was a good advantage really, they had a cook so we didn't have to bother anymore.

[Part 1 0:41:57] Lee: Do you remember a chap called Roy Wood for Hunting's?

Palmer: No

[Part 1 0:42:04] Lee: He was developing the photographs back in base. No, different year maybe.

Palmer: No

[Part 1 0:42:13] Lee: Did you and Mott ever come to verbal blows?

Palmer: No, no

[Part 1 0:42:18] Lee: You maintained your authority?

Palmer: Hopefully [laughs]

[Part 1 0:42:26] Lee: This sudden influx after just being 5 or 6 of you on base for the Hunting's team to arrive that second summer effectively wasn't it? Must have been quite a change?

Palmer: Yes

[Part 1 0:42:38] Lee: Did it get livelier?

Palmer: Yea. Good change obviously

[Part 1 0:42:45] Lee: Was that your first close encounter with flying?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 1 0:42:55] Lee: Did you go up?

Palmer: On one trip yea

[Part 1 0:42:59] Lee: Tell me about that

Palmer: No it wasn't my first encounter. When I was in Singapore on one occasion a cousin was in the RAF, a pilot, and he was based at Changi. Whilst I was there I went to stay up in the officers' mess with him and that was my first trip. He said 'we've got a test flight tomorrow do you want to come up with us?' which was on a Dakota, a DC3. That was my first airborne experience.

[Part 1 0:43:40] Lee: But you also got one at Deception as well? Tell me about that trip?

Palmer: It was in one of the Canso's. Also in a Chilean helicopter, they gave us a ride round once.

[Part 1 0:43:56] Lee: Was the Canso doing a survey run?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 1 0:44:00] Lee: Can you describe anything of that? What image do you have in your mind at the moment?

Palmer: I don't know, it was just a trip really

[Part 1 0:44:24] Lee: You must have enjoyed it though?

Palmer: Oh of course yes!

[Part 1 0:44:30] Lee: Do you think you were sowing the seeds for a later career at that point?

Palmer: No

[Part 1 0:44:38] Lee: Ok we'll come to your flying career later on in the interview if that's alright with you. One of the things you say in your report about the radio 'the transmitter was extremely difficult to service and if a major fault developed there would be a lot of work involved to strip the set. In future it is suggested that the main transmitter and receivers be standardised with the equipment on relief vessels'. So what was your thinking there?

Palmer: Get some modern gear

[Part 1 0:45:27] Lee: But also possibly that if your radio was the same as that on the ships then

Palmer: Could do a swap

[Part 1 0:45:33] Lee: You could get some spares

Palmer: Yea

[Part 1 0:45:36] Lee: Did they pay any attention to your recommendation?

Palmer: Doubt it

[Part 1 0:45:38] Lee: You doubt it? OK. There was something about frequencies too that you were recommending that everything be on common frequencies. I'm not quite sure what you meant by that?

Palmer: No, I can't remember

[Part 1 0:46:01] Lee: 'It's also suggested that to simplify communications with sledge parties etc. all bases have the same type of set all with the same frequency range, a range between 3 and 6 MCS probably being the best'. That suggests you'd had struggles at times to reach people by radio

Palmer: The sledge sets were again ex-army equipment and they were really crap. It wasn't a need at Deception, we did try them out of course but at Danco we needed them and they were not very good at all. They got moisture in them, they mostly failed.

[Part 1 0:47:15] Lee: They let you down did they?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 1 0:47:17] Lee: Did that cause problems, panics?

Palmer: Well at Danco I said if the sets, you can't use them properly, we had a code to click the transmitter button one for 'yes' and two for 'no' you'd be asked questions and the person on the sledge set would respond with a click. It happened on two or three occasions that the set failed.

[Part 1 0:47:56] Lee: But you could still hear it being switched on and off?

Palmer: Yea so you were in contact with them.

[Part 1 0:48:06] Lee: Are you in danger? Yes or no. Do you need help? Yes or no

Palmer: Yea

[Part 1 0:48:11] Lee: The sledging equipment generally you reckon was fairly inadequate at Deception?

Palmer: Yea well it wasn't a sledging base anyway. We did repair and get a Nanson sledge in good condition

[Part 1 0:48:32] Lee: So you overhauled the sledge did you? OK. Any boating?

Palmer: We had a dinghy of course. We used to go sealing in the summer round to the Chileans or the Argentineans

[Part 1 0:48:57] Lee: Seals were in short supply I believe for the dogs?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 1 0:49:06] Lee: I get the impression you had two boats but only one with working outboard motor?

Palmer: Did we have two boats? Yea we did

[Part 1 0:49:14] Lee: 'Both dinghies have been well used but only one outboard motor has been serviceable due to a fracturing of a drive shaft on the other engine'.

Palmer: That's right yea

[Part 1 0:49:25] Lee: So boating was just really to get to the lighthouse and to collect seals and visits?

Palmer: Yea, yea

[Part 1 0:49:33] Lee: Did you ever go outside the bay?

Palmer: No, no

[Part 1 0:49:39] Lee: I love this comment from you Pidge 'the steak and kidney pies as supplied are a waste of money'. [laughs] Do you remember them? What was wrong with them?

Palmer: Not like mother made!

[Part 1 0:50:03] Lee: 'The meat content is small; the suet pudding is very poor and was always thrown away'.

Palmer: There's quite a difference with the Argentinean and Chileans. The Chileans had a cow in calf and sheep and chickens they kept in their emergency hut. They chopped one down occasionally and had fresh stuff. The Argentineans had a freezer about as big as this room which was stocked with Argentinean beef every year, and so they were on fresh meat most of the time. We had these bloody steak and kidney puds and dried vegetables. They couldn't believe what our food supplies were like.

[Part 1 0:51:06] Lee: Was that embarrassing inviting them back to your base for hospitality

Palmer: We never invited them for a meal. We used to get invited for meals but we never had them back for a meal.

[Part 1 0:51:21] Lee: Why do you think your food was so poor compared to theirs?

Palmer: I suppose they thought about it a bit more. The Argentinians built a freezer in the Antarctic and the Chileans thought 'well we'll have live stuff that we can knock off now and again'.

[Part 1 0:51:49] Lee: Do you think perhaps that BAS could have done more to provide you with gear?

Palmer: I don't think they thought very much about the food supply

[Part 1 0:52:05] Lee: Or indeed the equipment

Palmer: We got dished out with string vests, flannelette pyjamas. It was really inadequate. Fortunately most of us had our own gear. Most of us thought about the severe weather conditions and bought gear fortunately. As I say string vests, or ex-army gear or navy stuff.

[Part 1 0:52:43] Lee: So was there a sense that you weren't really being looked after as well as you might?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 1 0:52:47] Lee: Was this resented?

Palmer: No, you just have to get on with it

[Part 1 0:52:52] Lee: How were relations with HQ, because so far away there's always that temptation to imagine that management don't really know what's going on?

Palmer: Management should have known what was going on because they'd all been involved themselves, which surprises me they hadn't made any improvements on what they'd been with

[Part 1 0:53:20] Lee: This occupied your mind quite a bit I guess from your base report that things could have been so much better for very little extra effort

Palmer: Yea

[Part 1 0:53:32] Lee: Do you think it was a shoestring budget?

Palmer: Yes obviously. Much better now isn't it; seeing some of the gear that they've got, amazing.

[Part 1 0:53:45] Lee: Are you impressed?

Palmer: Yes

[Part 1 0:53:48] Lee: Would it be the same do you think going back now? If you were going there now compared to 60 years ago?

Palmer: No

[Part 1 0:54:00] Lee: How do you imagine the differences to be?

Palmer: Look at the accommodation for a start and the facilities. It's all completely different

[Part 1 0:54:16] Lee: Different kind of person?

Palmer: Probably not

[Part 1 0:54:23] Lee: Ok. Let's pause and then we'll pick up again in a few minutes time and talk about Danco more

Palmer: OK

[Part 2 0:00:00] Lee: This is Cyril 'Pidge' Palmer interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on 1st February 2013. 'Pidge' Palmer part two

[Part 2 0:00:12] Lee: Pidge I was sent a document written by Peter Hooper, who died quite recently, about heading south the year you went to the Antarctic to Anvers Island. 'For the first 3 weeks of the voyage Pidge Palmer and Lofty Tyson ran the hotel on the ship'. What does he mean by that? 'Helping in the galley and servicing meals. It was comparatively hard work serving and clearing up the meals and giving the whole mess and bunk area a thorough cleaning every morning including scrubbing the floors and organising Porky'. What do you remember about him?

Palmer: Porky the little mess boy. Nice little lad. Shouldn't have been at sea

[Part 2 0:01:04] Lee: Why not?

Palmer: He wasn't fitted for it really

[Part 2 0:01:09] Lee: This is on the *Biscoe* going down isn't it?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 2 0:01:12] Lee: You had some 3 days off the boat in Montevideo. I think you should start confessing now don't you? What did you get up to?

Palmer: A lot [laughs]

[Part 2 0:01:23] Lee: What can you tell me?

Palmer: We went to a hotel, quite a posh hotel. We used to have a wonder round during the day and then we found a particular bar, club type place, in the evening. Mostly University students there and we became very friendly with some of them. The girl I met came to see us off when we sailed. Even sent me records and wrote to me down south about what was going to happen to the two of us after I came back from the Antarctic. But it was not possible to keep in communication with her. Rather disappointing for her I imagine because she seemed rather keen on me.

[Part 2 0:02:53] Lee: You think she fell in love do you?

Palmer: I think so yea.

[Part 2 0:02:56] Lee: Were you communicating in English or Spanish or both?

Palmer: English, bit of Spanish.

[Part 2 0:03:04] Lee: And you couldn't maintain the communication from the Antarctic that was the problem?

Palmer: Well one of the problems yea, I really wasn't interested anyway

[Part 2 0:03:17] Lee: Settling down eh. Did you manage to communicate at all from Deception or with her?

Palmer: No

[Part 2 0:03:33] Lee: So it was all one way traffic?

Palmer: Yea, which I wasn't happy about but then I didn't intend to do anything about it anyway so there wasn't much point in continuing.

[Part 2 0:03:50] Lee: You could have sent a letter by boat sometime couldn't you, but best not?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 2 0:03:58] Lee: At the end of your first year at Deception I presume you'd signed for two years had you?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 2 0:04:03] Lee: Did you know where you were going to be second year?

Palmer: No. They obviously told me where I was going but I can't remember the occasion

[Part 2 0:04:20] Lee: You were in fact going to set up a new base on the Danco coast at Danco Island. And you were not asked to be base leader?

Palmer: No, Foster was made base leader because he was I imagine, for the construction of the hut really. He was a surveyor type builder fellow.

[Part 2 0:04:48] Lee: Right, so you think that he was given the job because he was more appropriate for his skills.

Palmer: I think so. Maybe they thought he's not been too good at the last one. It didn't bother me.

[Part 2 0:05:03] Lee: It didn't worry you?

Palmer: No

[Part 2 0:05:05] Lee: Do you know why they decided to open a base at Danco Island?

Palmer: No, just to survey that area and geologise the area

[Part 2 0:05:16] Lee: But there was a problem wasn't there? At this location

Palmer: Finding a base site became difficult and that's why we went on this small island instead of the mainland. It was difficult to get onto the mainland.

[Part 2 0:05:39] Lee: My understanding of the process was it was the captain of the ship that chose the base site.

Palmer: Yea

[Part 2 0:05:46] Lee: And obviously he was thinking, well what was he thinking? He was thinking about access from the sea wasn't he? Was he overlooking something else?

Palmer: There was never any discussion with us about the site which was a bit disappointing. We were a couple of miles off the mainland and we only had a small dinghy which made it rather difficult. To get from the shoreline onto the (...) it was a climb

[Part 2 0:06:37] Lee: On the mainland you mean? You could get across to the mainland but then you had to get a route to the plateau? I think you made several attempts didn't you?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 2 0:06:45] Lee: What do you remember of that?

Palmer: It was good, I enjoyed it

[Part 2 0:07:01] Lee: Were you in any of the trips to try and find a route?

Palmer: Yea, we did man hauling of course. If they'd had dogs it would have been impossible to get them onto the mainland. It wouldn't have been feasible at all.

[Part 2 0:07:21] Lee: Do you remember a particular trip where you tried to get up to the plateau and couldn't?

Palmer: No not really. I remember we stopped on one trip for a brew and a smoke, and I was standing by the side of the sledge and went down into a hole, so we moved quickly from that particular spot

[Part 2 0:07:56] Lee: Was this a snow bridge that collapsed?

Palmer: Yea. Fred Wooden, I don't know who he was with, fell down a crevasse you know, and they spent the night there and eventually got out the next day using the sledge as a ladder. They didn't fall down too far and then onto a bridge. That was when you needed to be able to talk, and the only way we communicated was clicking the handset.

[Part 2 0:08:40] Lee: So he was clicking down a crevasse was he? Were you on the surface or back at base?

Palmer: I was back at base.

[Part 2 0:08:50] Lee: Tell me a bit more about that. Were they just the two of them out alone?

Palmer: Yes. I can't remember who he was with. Might have been Ginger Ketley the other assistant surveyor

[Part 2 0:09:13] Lee: It'd make sense wouldn't it? So what happened? How did you discover that the problem had arisen?

Palmer: We had a schedule, radio schedule at certain times

[Part 2 0:09:33] Lee: And did it happen?

Palmer: 'Come in Fred' or whatever and just a click so then we started questioning. But they got out.

[Part 2 0:09:51] Lee: Was there a rescue party?

Palmer: No they got out the following morning and came on down to the landing space.

[Part 2 0:10:04] Lee: When you went down was that a long way down?

Palmer: Oh no I was only up to my waist.

[Part 2 0:10:11] Lee: So that was a little warning? There's a photograph of the hut here at Danco. Did you build that?

Palmer: We built the hut yea but that's not the hut that was our little bivouac while we were building.

[Part 2 0:10:29] Lee: Oh right

Palmer: There was packing cases and tarpaulin over the top

[Part 2 0:10:36] Lee: This is the temporary accommodation?

Palmer: Yea. I could show you some of the building work

[Part 2 0:10:46] Lee: Well tell me about it. Tell me about the process of building this hut

Palmer: It was very interesting. The building was made by Boulton and Paul in Lancashire somewhere builders of aircraft as well. The hut was built,

every piece was marked and then dismantled and then sent down to us. It worked out very well I thought, the pieces came together and we didn't have any problems. Making the site level was one of the things, building the concrete pillars for the hut to stand on.

[Part 2 0:11:45] Lee: Was this right by the shore or higher up?

Palmer: Very close to the shore. In fact they dropped us off and said 'we'll be back in X weeks to help you build the hut' and the day the *Shackleton* came back we put the last nail in the roof and hoisted the flag on the flagpole. So they didn't have to help us at all.

[Part 2 0:12:18] Lee: It was that efficient?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 2 0:12:20] Lee: And excellent timing from the captains point of view. Had you done that kind of thing before in your life?

Palmer: No. Les the carpenter he was an excellent fellow. Les Harris he was a real down to earth Scouser a bit rough, but lovely fellow and really knew his job.

[Part 2 0:12:51] Lee: He was foreman was he, dishing out tasks?

Palmer: He knew what was home. Foster, Dick was also very knowledgeable but Les was the main driving force on that

[Part 2 0:13:14] Lee: Yea Dick Foster he lives in Lancashire now

Palmer: Does he?

[Part 2 0:13:19] Lee: I saw him in the summer interviewing him. Describe the hut then to me. What was it like?

Palmer: When it was finished you mean?

[Part 2 0:13:33] Lee: Yea

Palmer: Very comfortable. We had a (...) I can show you all the photographs if you wish.

[Part 2 0:13:47] Lee: Just describe it in words

Palmer: There was the entrance with a bunker for the fuel. A passageway then the bunk room on the right and then an office further down. We had room in the loft for all the stores and my radio room which was hardly ever used of course; very comfortable, we even had curtains, gingham curtains [laughs]

[Part 2 0:14:30] Lee: Insulated?

Palmer: Yes, much better than the Deception hut obviously. Yea it was good. Double glazed windows, a stove in the bunk room and we had plenty of fuel fortunately, except when we needed it all the bags were frozen together so it was a mining job when you wanted to get extra fuel.

[Part 2 0:15:08] Lee: And of course as you mentioned earlier the generators failed so it was quite dark at times in there? And that meant you couldn't make many radio broadcasts?

Palmer: Right

[Part 2 0:15:21] Lee: So how were you filling your time if your main purpose the radio man's job was so truncated?

Palmer: We were improving the hut all the time and preparing for the next trip out.

[Part 2 0:15:40] Lee: What sort of refinements to the hut were you making?

Palmer: I built an imitation television set

[Part 2 0:15:54] Lee: I beg your pardon? You'll have to elaborate on that Cyril

Palmer: It was just a wooden box with a screen and a picture I put on the screen

[Part 2 0:16:07] Lee: Did people watch it? [laughs] So how much surveying actually got done then would you say?

Palmer: A fair amount. There wasn't any geology work done. What was his name the geologist?

[Part 2 0:16:44] Lee: Geologist Bayly. The geologist was called Bayly

Palmer: Yea what was his first name?

[Part 2 0:16:51] Lee: MB

Palmer: Mike was it? No it wasn't Mike Bayly. He was annoyed because he never found any Fossils

[Part 2 0:17:09] Lee: Brian

Palmer: Brian Bayly yea. We were out on a boating trip he and I looking for specimens and I was the only one that found one. It wasn't any use anyway because it was on the beach and so it wasn't in situ so he didn't know where it was from. He never found any other (...)

[Part 2 0:17:46] Lee: Because you were not sending Met results back because there was no weather men on base, the radio job was a lot smaller?

Palmer: Oh yea, well it was none existent really; I was just another member of the group. Waste of time; waste of my qualifications

[Part 2 0:18:09] Lee: I was going to say how did you feel about your time in the Antarctic because it does sound like you were less than fulfilled by what you were being asked to do?

Palmer: Oh no, I don't think so

[Part 2 0:18:20] Lee: No?

Palmer: No, no

[Part 2 0:18:22] Lee: How did you feel, how do you feel about your two years south?

Palmer: Great, I really enjoyed it

[Part 2 0:18:34] Lee: And do you think you achieved much or was it just a good experience?

Palmer: I suppose only during the second year at Danco having established the base and done some survey work

[Part 2 0:18:58] Lee: But were you already aware that the base eventually would be deemed to be in the wrong place?

Palmer: Oh yea

[Part 2 0:19:13] Lee: And that limited the work you could do because of the poor access onto the mainland.

Palmer: Yes

[Part 2 0:19:20] Lee: What else do you remember about that Danco year? [Pause] Were there any close calls?

Palmer: When we were out sledging yea. We were doing one trip the four of us, when we were relaying stores and stuff. The weather was fine so we got from one dump; we were going up to the other to make a camp. When we were at our new camp site the weather came down; no that's not true. We made a camp, put the tents up and then skied down to the stores dump and when we got there and was setting off back to the camp site the weather came down, a blizzard. We didn't know where we were. So we dug a hole and we stayed in it for the night managing to keep awake. When the blizzard went through, initially we tried keeping in contact with each other by ropes to fan out and try and find our camp. We knew we weren't far from it. When the blizzard went through we were about 50 yards from the tents fortunately.

[Part 2 0:21:46] Lee: When you dig a snow hole like that, do you then try and cover yourself with something or do you leave yourself open to the sky?

Palmer: We hadn't anything to cover ourselves with or the hole, no

[Part 2 0:21:57] Lee: So you were basically building a depression to get into rather like the trenches in the war?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 2 0:22:03] Lee: Hoping that the worst of it would fly over your heads?

Palmer: Yea that's right. Apparently, I don't know who said it, but you hadn't to go to sleep or else that was it. You'd freeze to death probably. So we had to keep awake all night which we managed, I don't know how but we did.

[Part 2 0:22:27] Lee: Were you fearful?

Palmer: I suppose you always think 'oh well we might get out of this hopefully'

[Part 2 0:22:40] Lee: Was there any time in the Antarctic when you did really fear for your life, when you thought that you might be a goner?

Palmer: No, no

[Part 2 0:22:52] Lee: How about funny incidents? What made you laugh out loud?

Palmer: Can't think of anything

[Part 2 0:23:07] Lee: When your time came towards the end of your second year and you started contemplating coming home again, how were you feeling, were you glad to leave?

Palmer: No, no not glad at all, no. A bit sorry in fact

[Part 2 0:23:25] Lee: So what had happened in those two years to make you feel reluctant to come home?

Palmer: I enjoyed the whole time there and you didn't know what I was coming back to anyway

[Part 2 0:23:41] Lee: Teddy boys and Bill Haley. I'll come to that in a minute. Had you fallen in love with the place then

Palmer: I think so yea, Danco yea, not Deception

[Part 2 0:23:59] Lee: And what was it you were falling in love with?

Palmer: No idea

[Part 2 0:24:07] Lee: The landscape?

Palmer: Yea and the fact that you were there with (...) Not many other people had had the privilege to be there as well.

[Part 2 0:24:25] Lee: Was Danco particularly beautiful?

Palmer: Yea I think so

[Part 2 0:24:30] Lee: Can you explain?

Palmer: Beautiful from the top of our island

[Part 2 0:24:50] Lee: It's a particularly spectacular landscape isn't it? You've got a panorama photograph, one of those ones where several pictures are placed in a run together

Palmer: Now I don't know if you want to record the next bit

[Part 2 0:25:05] Lee: You tell me, come on

Palmer: You see these two peaks?

[Part 2 0:25:13] Lee: Yea, in the distance

Palmer: There's a girl in Stanley in the office called Una and we named those Una's Tits! [Laughs] I don't think it ever got on the map

[Part 2 0:25:34] Lee: So who was Una?

Palmer: Una, she was a girl in the office in Stanley.

[Part 2 0:25:40] Lee: Was she well endowed?

Palmer: Probably. I know Fred put them down on his survey as that but I don't think the Antarctic place names committee passed it.

[Part 2 0:25:59] Lee: They are known universally amongst Fids as Una's Tits; on the map they're Una's Peaks

Palmer: Oh really?

[Part 2 0:26:05] Lee: Yea. So Una is immortalised I believe, I'm sure I've seen this. She's immortalised but her bosom is not. [Laughs]. What more can you tell me about Una? Was she fun?

Palmer: I don't know I never met the girl.

[Part 2 0:26:23] Lee: Oh I see [Laughs] When you came out of the Antarctic, how did you get back, on the *Shackleton*?

Palmer: Yes, when we came out the new governor was coming to the Falkland Islands so we were having to stay a month in Port Stanley. When the *Biscoe* went up to Montevideo to pick up the governor I went up on it, I asked permission to go up on it and stay in Montevideo until the *Biscoe* came back again, which I did so I had a month in Monte

[Part 2 0:27:13] Lee: Did you meet the senorita again?

Palmer: No. Someone gave me the name of a girl in Stanley who was a nurse in Montevideo. I contacted her and she showed me round. She said 'I'm going out to an Englishman who runs a cattle farm or something just outside Montevideo, would you like to go?' I went with her and there

was a girl, she was of Russian decent. She was the Loans Manager for the Bank of Canada and she and I became quite friendly. I had quite a good month in Monte

[Part 2 0:28:20] Lee: Why did you have to hang around? Why did you have to go back to Stanley to meet Arrowsmith I think it was, who was coming to take over?

Palmer: I don't know. We were all a bit annoyed really. We'd finished, why we couldn't go straight home. And then we had to hang around in (...) I was fortunate and had the month in Monte.

[Part 2 0:28:47] Lee: But you had to go back to meet Arrowsmith?

Palmer: No

[Part 2 0:28:50] Lee: You didn't?

Palmer: No, no. I picked the *Biscoe* up when she came back to Montevideo

[Part 2 0:28:58] Lee: Do you know why the other Fids were made to wait for him. Was this etiquette?

Palmer: No. I came home on the *Shackleton* didn't I, that's right I waited for the *Shackleton* to come back. They weren't able to travel back to the UK until the new fellow was installed.

[Part 2 0:29:26] Lee: Because they were catching the ship that brought him?

Palmer: Right yes

[Part 2 0:29:30] Lee: I see ok. What happened when you got back to the UK? It was a very interesting time the late 50's. There were lots of changes happening weren't there? Did you notice differences?

Palmer: Oh yes

[Part 2 0:29:43] Lee: Such as?

Palmer: I don't know really. I can't think of anything off hand

[Part 2 0:29:56] Lee: Some people say everything had speeded up. Did you feel that? You were back in '57?

Palmer: '57 yes

[Part 2 0:30:12] Lee: What happened to Pidge Palmer after that? What was your next adventure?

Palmer: I contacted an old friend Ted Van Dort who was a marine RO³ in the same company as me when I was at sea and he said he was taking his flight RO's licence at Hamble, air service training at Hamble, and why didn't I do the same, start flying. So I took the course in Hamble, got my licence and I wanted to join Aquila Airways flying boats out of Southampton which was part of the Silver City Britavia⁴ Group. I was on the waiting list for a vacancy and one of the chaps I was on my radio course with, a South African, got the job, he was one ahead of me, one ahead of me. A vacancy came up for an RO with Aquila, he joined them and a couple of months later they had a crash on the Isle of White after take-off and after that the company, the flying boat service folded up. In the meantime the personnel chap said 'while you're waiting for a vacancy in Aquila would you like to go out to Libya on the DC-3's working for the oil companies'.

[Part 2 0:32:18] Lee: And you were piloting these planes?

Palmer: No still an RO

[Part 2 0:32:22] Lee: Radio Operator?

Palmer: Yea. So I went out to Libya for 3 years. At the same time John Ryder another RO and myself bought a Tiger Moth and had it shipped out to Libya. RO's were being phased out at that stage because of the advance in communications, single side band and so forth. We were going for our pilots licences and I'd already got a private pilot's licence anyway. There was 6 of us RO's in Libya and I was chief RO at the time. They made the others redundant and kept me on in case of any special trips. The company I'd been freelancing with Morton Air Services at Croydon Airport when I got my licence initially said they were short of someone to go out to Chittagong. Would I consider coming back and joining on a permanent basis instead of freelance, which I did because we were flying Doves and Herons⁵ in that company, and it meant that I could log any empty leg as pilot time, right. So I joined Morton Air Services again, went out to Chittagong for 14 months. We also had

³ RO – radio operator

⁴ British Aviation Services

⁵ Doves and Herons – types of De Havilland aircraft from the post-world war 2 period

contracts in Karachi for Sui Gas and Rangoon for Burma Oil. So I spent time in Karachi and Rangoon as well but my long term was in Chittagong.

[Part 2 0:34:52] Lee: How long were you there for?

Palmer: 14 months. That was good. That's when I met Jim Greenshields the ex Canso pilot of the aerial survey.

[Part 2 0:35:05] Lee: Did you stay in the aviation business then for your professional life?

Palmer: Yea, after Morton's we became part of British United Airways. Myself and another chap were asked if we wanted to do the pilots course up in Perth. So we went up there for our checks and we were both accepted. The course in those days for a commercial pilots licence was £3000 which they said we would take out of your pay. That was fine. But at the same time Air Congo or Sabina Afrique as it was then, were looking for RO's in the Congo and the money was really, really good. I'd just been married and to pay £3000 back was going to be very difficult and newly married, so I opted for the Congo. Eventually my wife said 'you come home or we come to the Congo' which was when I joined Laker Airways on the ground. I was Op Superintendent when we went bust.

[Part 2 0:36:52] Lee: What do you recall of that period when Freddie Laker went under? Was it a shock?

Palmer: It was a shock yea. I used to take my children to school in Lingfield, and I used to get probably into Operations at about 9 o'clock in the morning, but when you left could be 24 hours later. I went into the Ops room and looked at the board and I said 'why hasn't the New York gone yet? Alan Mullership who was the duty officer at the time said 'we've gone bust'. So I said 'Alan don't mess about. Why hasn't the New York gone yet?' He said 'we've gone bust!' and I thought 'he means it'. That was it, that's how we found out.

[Part 2 0:37:57] Lee: Do you know why because he was right wasn't he? The *Skytrain* paved the way for everything that's happened since.

Palmer: That's right but all the national airlines ganged up on us. There were all kinds of things that happened. It was really bad. We kept going for a while. Douglas wanted us to keep going because we had quite a large (...) We were hurting the other airlines because we had the DC-10's by then. We were taking a lot of traffic from them. But it happened. Then

an American backer came in and wanted to start Laker Airways as British Atlantic with the same crews, same aircraft and go for the Falkland Island contract. So that was ok. And then he pulled out for some reason and it was when Branson got involved so Branson said 'I don't want DC-10's, I want 747's, I don't want the Falkland Islands, I want the States' So that meant all the crews and aircraft that was going to be British Atlantic couldn't be used anymore. I was going to be Ops Manager and Alan Hilary who was the chief pilot and Geoff who was the chief training captain couldn't be chief training captain because to train crews from DC-10's to 747's, very expensive even on a simulator. When everything fell through for British Atlantic Alan Hilary gave Geoff what was going to be my job as Ops Manager. So that was it, I got my old sea going licences out and went to work off shore on a drilling rig.

[Part 2 0:40:33] Lee: Oh really. Where was that?

Palmer: In the North Sea.

[Part 2 0:40:36] Lee: Aberdeen?

Palmer: Off Aberdeen yea.

[Part 2 0:40:39] Lee: Is that where you wound up your working life?

Palmer: Yea, unfortunately an American company Penrod drilling, their retiring age was 60 and when I got to 60 I said to the Ops manager 'I don't want to leave'. He said 'As long as you can pass your medicals and off shore survival, you can stay as long as you like'. Then he retired and our rig manager who hated Englishmen took over, and I got home one trip and there was a letter saying you've got to retire. And he'd been on the rig, on my rig the day before or two days before and he hadn't the guts to say it. I got to 69 before they made me retire.

[Part 2 0:41:40] Lee: You were 69 years old and working on an oil rig?

Palmer: Yea

[Part 2 0:41:44] Lee: Pidge that's pretty good going.

Palmer: Yea, yea. I thought of taking them to European court of law. [laughs]

[Part 2 0:41:54] Lee: So you retired at that point did you?

Palmer: I had to.

[Part 2 0:41:58] Lee: Looking back over an amazing career and lifetime how highly does the Antarctic rate, those 2 years south rate in your life?

Palmer: They all rate the same. I've always enjoyed what I've been doing, the various 5 separate careers, but I think maybe the Antarctic was slightly above the rest. [Pause] Yea

[Part 2 0:42:40] Lee: It's been great fun Pidge thank you very much indeed

Palmer: Thank you

[Part 2 0:42:42] <ENDS>

Possible Extracts:

- Working for FIDS eliminating need for National Service [Part 1 0:05:25]
- Being sent to Deception Island [Part 1 0:13:47]
- The state of the Base hut at Deception [Part 1 0:21:42]
- Using the basic radio gear [Part 1 0:36:24]
- Experiences with the radio sets [Part 1 0:46:01]
- The poor standard of food compared to the Chileans and Argentinians [Part 1 0:49:39]
- The choice of base site at Danco Island [Part 2 0:05:05]
- Building the hut at Danco [Part 2 0:10:46]
- Caught in a blizzard [Part 2 0:19:20]
- Trip to Montevideo [Part 2 0:26:23]
- Working for Laker Airways when they went under [Part 2 0:36:52]