

JON CLENNELL

Edited transcript of a recording of John Clennell by Chris Eldon Lee at the BAS club reunion at Alnwick 21st of June 2013, BAS archives AD6/24/1/223. Transcribed by Allan Wearden 27th of Oct, 2014.

[0:00:00] Lee: This is Jon Clennell interviewed by Chris Eldon Lee on the 21st of June 2013.

Clennell: My name is Jonathan Clennell and that is spelt C-l-e-n-n-e-l-l my date of birth is the 22nd of October 1935.

[0:00:22] Lee: So how old are you now Jon?

Clennell: [Big pause)] Erm 77!

[0:00:31] Lee: Ha, ha, that catches a lot of Fids out, that question! Would you say your father was an educated man?

Clennell: Don't really know, he must have been fairly well educated yes and he went to, his father my grandfather was a [Consular dweller?] and all his children were sent back to England for their education.

[0:01:01] Lee: In China you say?

Clennell: Yes and so he went to Felsted which I think was one of the sort of minor public schools, but it specialised in taking children of overseas civil servants and that sort of thing. [Lee: Diplomats?] Yes people who you know had some kind of government post overseas that kind of standard. Unfortunately grandfather was killed in an accident before he had finished his schooling and that meant grandmother couldn't afford the rest of the fees because there was some kind of problem over insurance pension and things, so he had to leave early but he went to Cranfield Aeronautical College where he took a, probably a diploma or a CMD or something like that? Anyhow it qualified him to get a sort of basic entrant into the RAF which he did in 1931 I think? But I was born in 1935 by which time he'd been in the Air Force you know quite a few years, but he was killed in 1940 so I wasn't that old, no sorry he was killed in early 1942 partly because he was in the Air Force I didn't see much of him anyway. But then when the war came I saw even less, but he was on a reserved occupation list as a test pilot when the war started!

[0:02:59] Lee: Did he die as a test pilot?

Clennell: No he got very frustrated and applied to go back on the active list and that was granted at the end of 1941, he went to a night fighter squadron in Norfolk [Coltishall?] Just in time to start a 6 months tour with the squadron and he was killed in an aircraft failure accident 2 days before the tour ended!

[0:03:35] Lee: What was his name?

Clennell: His Christian name? [Lee: Yes] He was known by 3 different names! My mother called him James, his mother called him Geoffrey and some people called him Ian! So his full initials were G.J.I. but as I say my mother called him James.

[0:04:03] Lee: But you actually chose to go into the Army rather than the RAF?

Clennell: The principal reason for that was, I am colour blind to the extent that neither the Navy or the Air Force would accept me, in fact the Army were a bit dubious, but they did actually accept me.

[0:04:26] Lee: So you were keen to become a serviceman then, was that your father's memory do you think?

Clennell: No, because by that time my 'step', my mother remarried in 1945 when I was 10 and he was a Roman Catholic and so was my mother by then. And I went to a Catholic preparatory school but my stepfather had been in, at the time of his marriage he was still in the Army and at the end of my schooling. I suddenly realised I'd have to make a very serious decision the school Ampleforth College sort of my final schooling, weren't very good on careers! If you wanted to go to university it had to be Oxford or Cambridge basically which meant you had to go into a special setting from your 6th form onwards really were you were coached and given all the special preparatory training and qualifying for the entrance, and that didn't seem to me to have particular purpose to it, as I didn't know what I'd do even if I did go. You know I'd no vision of an outcome after that if I did go and it obviously meant a lot of hard work. So I passed on that and that was really where the school stopped because they didn't have much in the way. I could have joined the company firm, I mean the family firm which a lot of my contemporaries did. I could have gone into some kind of estate management or so I believe, one had in those days networking, which still exists of course but through school I could have probably found some landed gentry who was willing to take on someone perhaps for estate management, but didn't fancy that. But about the only option left seemed to be the Army!

[0:06:50] Lee: Did you specialise in the Army?

Clennell: No I was a PBI, a 'Poor Bloody Infantryman'! But I did join my stepfather's regiment 'The Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry'.

[0:07:03] Lee: Did you see any kind of serious service?

Clennell: Yes, serious for me anyway, I went through Sandhurst eventually and the Army quite perspectively turned me down twice for a commission, a regular commission but eventually at the 3rd attempt I knew the ropes, so I sort of just breezed it I thought this is weird. And for my sins I was sent off to Sandhurst I think I had the option not to go, I wouldn't go again, I wouldn't take that route again! And I was treated, well like a school kid by people who were younger than I was based on the sort of public school system, where you had senior people you know having quite a lot of influence on the way your life went!

[0:08:19] Lee: So were you looking for an escape route then, when Peter Gibbs appeared on the scene?

Clennell: Ah well! He appeared on the scene, yes when I was sort of at the end of my 6 years.

[0:08:32] Lee: You'd known him anyway?

Clennell: I knew of him, because I was courting his cousin at the time and he had an aunt and uncle who lived in Plymouth I happened to be stationed there, during the last couple of year of my service.

[0:09:00] Lee: He remembers being given a lift by you, on more than one occasion.

Clennell: Well he used to come, after he came back from the Antarctic he came down 2 or 3 times I think to visit his cousins, as I say I was courting one of the daughters his cousin and I was seriously considering going into the Special Air Service (SAS) as an alternative to going back to my regiment and I didn't really fancy pottering around in Germany just watching people painting stones and pretending to be soldiers as the threat that hung over the armoured divisions of the Russians and the Red Army could muster! So I thought 'It's either that or I'm out', and sensibly I chose out! And that was the time when I bumped into Peter Gibbs so when I learnt that he'd been to the Antarctic I thought 'That sounds a really interesting alterative', but I didn't foresee it obviously it being a long term career, I did at least think it would provide a bit of thinking time?

[0:10:27] Lee: Can you remember that process? What was it about, what did Peter say or do that made you take him seriously?

Clennell: It had obviously had quite a considerable impact on him, he'd obviously taken it seriously and he'd had a really interesting time, which when I got on to Stonington base I realised just how interesting it really was you know just reading his sledging reports and things. But he agreed to give me Bill Sloman's telephone number I think, and give him a ring and see what he says? Which I did eventually and to my amazement Bill said 'Come and see me!'

[0:11:19] Lee: Had you got an inkling, had you got a desire to go south had something happened earlier in your life to make you think that would be a nice place to go?

Clennell: No, not really!

[0:11:30] Lee: You'd seen *Scott of the Antarctic* hadn't you?

Clennell: I'd seen the film *Scott of the Antarctic* years before.

[0:11:34] Lee: But it hadn't inspired you at all?

Clennell: Difficult to say, I mean I didn't have a burning ambition to go.

[0:11:41] Lee: Yeah, that's what I'm getting at yeah!

Clennell: But on the other hand, my time in the Army had sort woken me up to all sorts of things of the real outside world. And I thought well this is an opportunity that I'm probably never ever likely to get again, so it I don't take this one and see where it leads! You know despite my courting, I was rejected actually, but despite that I had no prospects or anything particular to do so I thought it's a good time to go before something might tie me down.

[0:12:23] Lee: You'd been doing mountaineering hadn't you and that type of outdoor activities?

Clennell: I'd done quite a lot yes, towards the end of my time at Sandhurst I got involved with a group my contemporaries who were very keen mountaineers, one of who was Chris Bonnington and I used to go climbing with them, in the Avon Gorge to start with and that got me started into rock climbing and sort of into mountaineering and when I was in the Army I didn't do that much actually. But I was actually more keen on sailing, but one or two opportunities came up. One of the things I discovered in the Army was you wanted to read the small print at back of all these sort of matters of documentation etc: And right at the back there was sort of an appendices of possible jobs you might that they were trying to recruit for, and there where trips to mountainous regions all round the world that you could sign up for! And so very few people have actually got to the trouble of reading the back, if you'd put your name down the chances are you'd probably get it!

[0:13:39] Lee: Oh right!

Clennell: So that's how I picked up most of my mountaineering experience.

[0:13:45] Lee: So with that experience in your locker, you then had an interview with FIDS I guess.

Clennell: Yes!

Lee: Do you remember that particularly that day?

Clennell: I remember bits of it think I had to fill in an IQ test or something.

[0:14:02] Lee: Did you?

Clennell: Something like that anyway, I don't know what it was called but it was one of these questionnaire things you know on a scale of 1 to 5 where you put yourself and this and that!

[0:14:21] Lee: A kind of personality test?

Clennell: I suppose it was yes, I can't remember too much about it, it obviously didn't matter much and then got an interview I think that might have been separate from being called for an interview with Bill. Whatever I finished up just as you and I are now just chatting in his office, we didn't touch much on the Antarctic actually we just talked about things he wanted to find out about me, you know he just chatted to me.

[0:14:57] Lee: So do you think perhaps Peter Gibbs had put a word in for you, and it was a fairly done deal?

Clennell: I don't think, I wouldn't like to think that was the case! I mean Bill Sloman would have known Peter Gibbs therefore if Peter had said anything to him, I think Peter or either Bill got in touch with him I don't think he wrote, I don't think he said he would I think I said to him 'Please don't, I don't want it to appear someone is pushing me I would like to be selected because [...]'

[0:15:34] Lee: On merit!

Clennell: Somebody they wanted to have, so don't think he would have written, Bill might well have rung him seems sensible if he had! Then he said 'We'll let you know' and I had to go and do something I had left the Army by then and so I went to I went to work with the Outward Bound Trust in the Lakes at Eskdale. Then one day I got a letter saying 'You've been selected to go down to in the winter of 61-62 and you'll get more joining instructions in due course', and that led to eventually firstly I think it was a weekend in Cambridge, which 'Bunny' Fuchs took part in, don't know can't remember how much he actually did, I don't remember much about that actually so it can't have been a major informative thing, think I probably took one or two notes?

[0:16:49] Lee: You don't remember being given crevasse rescue training or survival techniques?

Clennell: I was expected to provide that!

[0:16:55] Lee: You were doing that were you?

Clennell: But I think I was taken on as a 'Gash Hand'/ Mountaineer [GA] so I think that's what I was expected to do!

[0:17:05] Lee: Here or when you got there?

Clennell: When I got there.

[0:17:08] Lee: And did you?

Clennell: Yes, once for real!

[0:17:13] Lee: There was an incident, an incident?

Clennell: Yeah, I think I mentioned?

[0:17:17] Lee: Do you want talk about that now?

Clennell: Yes if you think it's the right moment to do so? It happened fairly late on in my time down there, it must have been in my 2nd year we had a dentist a chap called Dave Benyon who came down and was of course the only medical qualified person on the base. I was the Base Leader for that 2nd year and I think along with standard practice for FIDS

fortunately, we had a rule you had to be in for every meal or booked out and we noticed at lunchtime this particular day, Dave wasn't there!?

[0:18:03] Lee: What was his surname?

Clennell: Benyon I think.

Lee: Benyon OK!

Clennell: He was a dentist from somewhere like Newcastle, Gosforth or Gateshead or something in fact I think he has just retired someone told me. Anyway he was missing and we got binoculars out to see if we could see him around the base? And nobody could, so I suppose lunch was probably cancelled and we decided we better get our gear on and go and look for the buggie so we, he wasn't on the island so that meant he was on the sea ice somewhere or he had gone up the glacier? So in those days you could actually walk up the glacier, they never advised you to walk up if you were going out, either you went by sledge or you went on skis. But we knew he wasn't very good on skis so if he gone up the glacier he must have been walking, as it turned out he had walked along fairly near the edge of the glacier front which was fairly stationary in those days, but there were crevasses!

And he fallen into one of these crevasses but it was sheer good fortune we found the one that he fallen into, because by the time we were out there, there was drifting snow and somehow or other snow when it drifts, when it actually reaches a crevasse it starts to build a bridge. I don't know how the particles actually cling together because they actually cantilever out but eventually close. And one of our party was crossing a crevasse on skis and he thought he heard a noise, but there was no hole big enough for a person to have gone down. Think he said there may have been a small gap, anyway so he turned back and he heard another sort of moan & groan sort of sound! So he summoned everybody and they all trooped across to get there, and by this time I think somebody had opened the crevasse and was able to get a decent view and I think amazingly Dave was still conscious, by that time someone was talking to him that's when we had to do a crevasse rescue! Fortunately the year before we'd had Johnny Cunningham as Base Leader and he'd got us very competent and one of the things he specialised in was crevasse rescue, so we had the drill fairly well sorted and we eventually got him out!

[0:21:24] Lee: How?

Clennell: With ropes and harness and so on.

[0:21:30] Lee: Did somebody go down?

Clennell: Someone went down yeah, yeah they had to fix him on because Dave was not really able to do anything himself, he'd actually split the top of his skull almost completely from ear to ear and every now again the front flap would flop down over his face not a pretty sight!! So the first thing of course was to bandage him up and try and hold the whole thing together and of course we weren't sure if Dave had been concussed or worse had actually cracked his skull and perhaps he might have even have been suffering from a haemorrhage or

something. So got him back to the base, put him a sledge dragged him back got him in, and as I say he was the medical man so the only medical trained person on the base! Our wireless operator meanwhile had managed to raise a doctor in Port Stanley and so we were getting advice on certain questions we needed to ask and trying find the answers too, and told try and keep him awake don't let him go to sleep. And as Base Leader I had to make a decision on, I don't fancy trying to sew up his skull! So I delegated it and fortunately we had a chap called Ron Tindal who had come down from Hope Bay and very experienced dogman and so on, and one of his dogs I think literally only a few days before had got into a serious scrap with one of his mates and Ron had to put about 10 stitches into his dog and I said 'You're the one in training Ron, here's your ultimate test get cracking!' And I think he put 32 stitches in or something!

[0:23:38] Lee: How was David, by now?

Clennell: Oh, he survived without any serious after effects I think, a very chastened man, so were we! He realised but for the grace of God you know we would have lost him!

[0:23:56] Lee: He was breaking a cardinal rule with going out on his own wasn't he?

Clennell: Absolutely yes!

[0:24:03] Lee: You had no idea as Base Leader he was doing that?

Clennell: No, he'd never done it before I don't think he had any ulterior motive as far as I know?

[0:24:14] Lee: He was, just went for a stroll?

Clennell: Nice sunny day and it must have been late autumn down there, and he went out for a stroll as you say he broke some cardinal rule leaving the base without telling anyone.

[0:024:33] Lee: Did that experience change the way you managed that aspect of base life?

Clennell: No, I didn't have to we realised, it was a learning experience for all of us! And no Johnny, I don't know how much you know about Johnny Cunningham but he was?

[0:24:58] Lee: Tell me about him?

Clennell: A lot been written about him, he was a very charismatic character he was one of Glasgow's hard lads. He was one of the founder members of the Craig Dhu climbers' club who were the crack off beat rock climbing fraternity in the west coast of Scotland and they were pretty desperate men tough as nails! Completely without scruples I think, not fair to call them amoral as I don't think they would know what that meant, but he was there for, not just Base Leader he was 'King Dog' and the disadvantage of that kind of leadership of course if it stopped for some reason or other. They leave or something happens to them of course it leaves a bit of a vacuum, and I knew I couldn't possibly replace him in his style.

[0:25:12] Lee: Were you surprised to be asked?

Clennell: Yes, but looking back on it not that surprised as I had been an officer in the Army and had some experience of logistics as well as you know my mountaineering experience.

[0:26:31] Lee: But you regarded him to be a good Base Leader when you were one of his team?

Clennell: Yes.

[0:26:38] Lee: So did you adopt his tactics when you became Base Leader?

Clennell: No completely different.

[0:26:40] Lee: What was the different about your style to his?

Clennell: Democratic, transparent, soft rather than hard almost a complete antithesis! I think some people found it difficult, I know Ron Tindal found it difficult to start with because he thought I should be more domineering, but if I was to him he told me so! Which I was quite pleased he felt free to do so, but I mean I wasn't domineering it wasn't my style so once people got the idea you know if there was an issue that needed a resolution we got something at the core 'smoko' or something. We sat down tea and biscuits and had a go at trying to sort things out.

The real test of that came not long after my time started as a Base Leader, because we were given a fairly tough assignment for the following year, the field work year. To go across to the east coast and do quite lot of topographical and geological survey and that required according to the 'Master Plan' the aircraft from Deception Island to come down and ferry a lot, something like one & half or two tons of depots over the plateau or even on to a depot on the east coast. And we got news that both aircraft had got damaged in a storm at Deception Island and therefore that part of the plan no longer existed! So we had to work out what to do instead and of course life in those days as a surveyor or geologist, a field worker of some scientific bent time is precious and the amount time travelling and so on was so much prohibitive really for the amount of work you were going to get anyhow. So to suddenly realise the whole of their year's work might not take place, was pretty damping.

[0:29:26] Lee: So how did you go about making new arrangements, were you totally alone or were you referring back to HQ, to London?

Clennell: I think, they knew what the situation was, I was asked to let Stanley know what ideas, what possible plans we had to try and make the best of the situation.

[0:29:53] Lee: So the onus was very much on you?

Clennell: It felt like it, partly because of my colleagues you know I could see the psychological impact I thought a whole year with these people totally frustrated might actually be quite unpleasant! I mean we were OK at that particular point, but as I say a year in the Antarctic is a long time. And so we had a council of war literally, you know we gathered round with maps and didn't have calculators in those days. But you know we tried to work out distances, loads per sledge, how many trips to move a ton, half a ton, quarter of a

ton whatever because quite prohibitive is the amount of dog food to carry to move a kilo of some kind of scientific equipment is totally prohibitive and then you have got the distances of travel in a day and then good weather, bad weather, high temperatures, low temperatures make a huge difference. And, so but I think this is where my Sandhurst training came in it was very helpful, because I was gradually able to conceive a logistical plan to work out how much, how far we could go without aircraft support i.e. we could get to a certain point on the east coast? If we could get about a ton to the top on the plateau, before the winter broke and stopped any farther movement. The spring we could get a party out and use the depot to advance another depot and so on, and in fact as it turned out we made quite a decent fist of it!

[0:32:23] Lee: And the aim was surveying work or geology work what was it?

Clennell: Both yeah.

[0:32:30] Lee: And Sodabread was a bit of an obstacle wasn't it?

Clennell: A major obstacle yes.

[0:32:36] Lee: Trying to get stores up Sodabread in not so good weather?

Clennell: Well we reckoned we'd have to try and do it balancing the amount of food we'd have to take to feed the dogs, we'd had about 5 days window, to get the stuff to the top of Sodabread. After that we'd be running out of dog food, running out of man food because we needed space on the sledge for the depot material! So it was the fine calculation, we had about 5 days and we just got the main, we'd done virtually the whole lift when the weather broke!

[0:33:20] Lee: Where there tricky moments were there not instances when your dogs were becoming quite incapacitated by ice?

Clennell: That's a consequence of the storm, I mean a blizzard the wind comes off the plateau something like a 100 mph plus!!

[0:33:39] Lee: This is the 'Fornicator' is it?

Clennell: I don't know what you call it but yeah it's not always the same, but this particular storm just happened to be pretty crucial to us, because it just swept across our camp site and it was so strong double walled tents were actually shedding micro granules of snow particle you could see them land, literally particles?

[0:34:17] Lee: Coming through the tent walls?

Clennell: Well it must have been, coming through the double tent walls! And in the middle of the tent was something jokingly called the 'Panic pole' we used to use it for hanging stuff up, Tilley lamp in particular but on the occasion I can tell you we were actually holding on to it!! And for one night we took it in turns to hang on to it, because if you lose the tent in those conditions you're dead!

[0:34:44] Lee: Did you fear for your life?

Clennell: Yes and no, one knew it was potentially possible there'd been cases in the past, but you never quite believe it is going to happen to you! In fact at one point I think I got out some loo paper and wrote out, this is the last message [Loud laughter from Lee!]

[0:35:14] Lee: What was your last message?

Clennell: That was considered fairly hilarious so you know morale wasn't that low!

[0:35:27] Lee: And the dogs outside?

Clennell: And the dogs you see, there was nothing you could do to protect them, the canny ones used to get up and walk round but the younger ones were particularly at risk, because their mums hadn't taught them this sort of thing. And I think we lost 2 dogs, what happened was they lie on their chains which melt into the ice, the longer they lie on them the deeper they go, and when they try to get up they can't! You had a long wire rope that was sort of central spine of the tethering system then the dogs were spaced out and as I say we lost 2 dogs that got iced in. And one or two others we had to do some drastic hair cutting to release huge great blocks of snow that had got frozen into their fur! And for about 36 hours you couldn't CRAP it was that bad if you'd taken your pants down the entire protective weather gear just filled with snow, so you just hung on! Anyway we survived and so we then packed up and went back to base, having achieved as I say about 98% I think we left a small depot at the bottom of Sodabread which might have been quite useful to have anyway because it would be a reserve for a party going out in the spring.

[0:37:19] Lee: What was the resultant of the survey and field work successful?

Clennell: More successful than I think we had anticipated yes, it nearly came to grief because although the planes that had been repaired and now flying they just simply couldn't get the right weather to be able to fly and the idea was they were going to pick up the dog teams and the blokes and ferry them back on to the glacier the sort of air base we had at Stonington. But day after day passed and they simply couldn't fly. The problem was they were very near their maximum altitude for load carrying. So the weather really had to be good and fairly stable, but got them all out. And the next problem was the ships, the relief ships couldn't get into Stonington so we were told those people due for relief could take a toothbrush! And ski out to some floes that we had been a grid reference for big enough for an Otter to land on and we would be picked up, by a plane and flown to Adelaide where we would be taken aboard the *Biscoe* for the return home. I thought 'I'm not taking a chance not even with a toothbrush', I didn't want to be standing on a floe watching myself and an Otter aircraft slowly sliding into the drink! Not having survived two years, two winters I thought that's not a good end! So I said right I'll stay on for a 3rd year, at that stage we hadn't of course got very much in the way, we'd been told to close the base down but we still had a decent reserve of food we would have got by.

[0:39:31] Lee: So you did stay for a 3rd year?

Clennell: I didn't no. Because the ships eventually came in!

[0:39:35] Lee: Oh the ships came in, well there was some debate about closing Stonington because of the ...?

Clennell: Off and on, the year Johnny Cunningham went out we were told the base would not be resupplied the following year and to close it. So my last task was, no I wasn't there at the time because I went, in my 1st year I was allocated to be the gash hand for the cross Marguerite Bay tractor party, which was an exciting adventure. And anyway we were told that the base at Stonington would be closed therefore we were presumably going out and would be reallocated to another base the following year? But by the time I was appointed Base Leader, I was told the base was actually going to be reopened and actually a fresh relief coming in, and so as soon as we got back from Fossil Bluff we had to reopen the base.

[0:40:47] Lee: There was some confusion on what to do with the whisky supplies I gather?

Clennell: No, none at all we knew exactly what to do with the whisky!

[0:40:55] Lee: You drank it then found you needed it!?

Clennell: We drank it and then found the base was to reopen, but they brought 3 man years of rations in, so we found had 3 man years ration of whisky and then we were told they were going to close the base at the end of that year. Of course as you've just heard they changed their mind about that, and we had drunk most of the whisky by then! Well we weren't going to leave it for the Chileans.

[0:41:24] Lee: No of course not!

Clennell: I absolutely nothing against the Chileans the ones we met were charming and very, very intrepid one could have nothing to say against either their professionalism or their just generally all round decency as guys, but the notion of leaving you know a dozen bottles of whisky or something for the Argentines or Chileans!?

[0:41:53] Lee: It's not cricket!

Clennell: Well it wasn't a good thing for morale.

[0:42:00] Lee: So this Trans-Marguerite Bay expedition, this was down to Fossil Bluff was it?

Clennell: Yes.

[0:42:04] Lee: Which you led?

Clennell No, We had two mechanical engineers one was a tank driver and the other was from the Royal Mechanical Engineers and they where wizards at their trade I mean absolutely wizard! They could have built anything and they designed a modification for the Muskegs tractors which was probably a generally a life saving device. They somehow reinforced cantilever brackets down the side of these muskegs to which you bolted great big 12 x 1½

planks, so if the tractor drops through the ice which it had done the previous year, these cantilevered planks would form a large holding platform probably at least long enough to enable people to get out of the tractor and possibly uncouple the sledges and that sort of thing. And even carry out some kind of rescue work, so that was the first thing they did and secondly built this caboose.

[0:43:25] Lee: This is Brian Bowler and?

Clennell: Brian Bowler and Ron Gill.

[0:43:30] Lee: Gill, Ron Gill but you helped Brian build this caboose didn't you, he was very proud of this caboose?

Clennell: He had every reason to be, I only sort of hammered a few nails in where I was told to and things like that.

[0:43:41] Lee: What was so good about it?

Clennell: Well compared to the dog teams, they have to carry these lovely tents and they take a long time to put up, all we had to do was stop the tractor and open the door and light the gas! And for Antarctic travelling I can tell you that is a boon, it meant we could make every minute's worth of good weather workable because we had a hatch in the top, poke your head out and see what the weather was like and right you know it's clearing. The worse thing about the Antarctic in terms of travelling particularly over sea ice is if the clouding becomes overcast you get this 'white out condition' it's not fog it just simply the contrast vanishes! And it's white on the ground and white in the sky, you've got nothing to I mean actually a compass isn't that much use because you can't see what's in front of you on the sea ice, it could be a crack or in our case we got floes that were canted up. Which you couldn't drive over or through you just had to simply pick your way round, so we needed good weather as I say as soon as it clamped down and we couldn't see and becoming dangerous. There were two options, one was if we thought it may be relatively brief or was urgent for some reason like the ice was cracking here, and you needed to get away. I was a skier so I had to get out in front in my orange anorak and ski and that proved useful because the orange because actually reflected off the ice floes and on important occasions the drivers could actually negotiate between the two orange patches. The other alternative was to stop and sit it out.

[0:45:53] Lee: How stable was this caboose going over this, was it sastrugi?

Clennell: Well sastrugi was a particular kind of snow rather than ice [actually long parallel snow ridges!]

[0:46:04] Lee: Well you must have met uneven ground?

Clennell: Oh yes, but it was the sledges were absolute, I mean they were sturdiest thing you could imagine they had to be really because as you said uneven ground and things like fuel drums lashed on to them. Which we had, quite apart from food boxes and things like that you know that load was pretty large, can't really remember what we had but up to the limit. And

they towed, the centre of gravity was quite low the caboose itself was quite high it rode the conditions.

[0:46:54] Lee: So the Muskeg could get over whatever it was and the caboose just followed?

Clennell: The caboose could follow.

[0:46:59] Lee: It took you 30 days to get to Fossil Bluff, was that good going?

Clennell: Yeah, well it was bloody good to arrive! Well I don't know if Allan told you? But after we had been going for 4 or 5 days or less perhaps 3 days we crossed the sound which was the first serious obstacle wide expanse of notorious unstable sea ice and about 10 miles across or something like that. And we got across safely and I think one gap, somebody measured it was about 18 inches of ice which is just about unique for stable travelling and we got across and ran into a lot of broken up ice and so we were slowed right down, we'd had a lovely crossing, started slowing down and on the 2nd or 3rd day and then the weather started turning and we weren't making much progress.

But the weather must have cleared enough for a flight from Adelaide Island, to come down and do a reconnaissance and the pilots were circling around over head and we managed to get a wireless connection and the pilot said, can't remember who it was? 'Do want the bad news or the really bad news!' So 'OK we'll take the bad news first', and he said 'What you are in now goes on for quite a long way, you can't actually see how far!' So that was pretty grim, so we said 'OK what's the really bad news?', 'There's no ice behind you, it's all gone out!' The fiord had just swept it clear, flushed it out so we couldn't go back if we wanted to so that was fate and not long after that we heard on the World News that Kennedy was telling the Russians that if they didn't turn their ships round there's going to be global nuclear war!! We thought that's nice here we are stuck in an impossible situation in the Antarctic 'Between the devil and the deep blue because even if we survive they'll be nothing to survive for!!'

[0:49:43] Lee: That, several Fids have talked about hearing the news about the 'Cuban Missile Crisis', '63 I think it was and the fact you were so far from civilization

Clennell: '62 end of '62 I think.

Lee: Had in fact a dual edged sword, one it was like a separate reality in that it was so far away on the other hand because you had little else to distract your attention in the Antarctic, it became quite an important piece of information?

Clennell: Well the problem was being so far away, it was quite likely you were going to be severed forever!

[0:50:21] Lee: You couldn't go back, nothing to go back to!?

Clennell: There might be nothing to go back to!?

(0.50.27:)Lee: Also you weren't getting the sort of daily news.

Clennell: We were likely to survive and everyone else probably wasn't, so we might be the last people left on Earth!

[0:50:34] Lee: Did that, was that a serious thought, or was that just a passing folly?

Clennell: As a Fid I don't think you had many serious thoughts. I mean you couldn't afford to have too serious a thought really and you know and so as a joke I can almost hear someone say 'Well that's it then!' You know, no going back, no going back what for!

[0:51:01] Lee: Well was there a grain of truth in that joke?

Clennell: I suppose there must have been, God knows probably even God wouldn't have known what would have happened if the Cuban missile crisis had actually gone the whole way? Anyway our pressing problem was we couldn't go back, so we had to go forward and that's when I discovered you know skiing had to be an option as we needed to get out of there!

[0:51:36] Lee: So on your skis you were checking the ground as you went along?

Clennell: Yes.

[0:51:43] Lee: For crevasse and you were finding a route effectively?

Clennell: I was happy to do route finding, but you can imagine I could only see as far as the other side of the room most of the time, you know I remember once just finding I was steadily skiing up hill and I thought 'Oh God!' And the next thing I realised was there was a ruddy great drop in front of me and I had skied up a slab of an ice floe! Fortunately I think Brian was in the lead Muskeg and he realised I was going up and up and decided to stop. Anyway we wriggled out of that and as I say the caboose, is what saved the day as every time we got clamped down by the weather, we'd just dive into the caboose and suddenly it went like this and the sun would break out, and we'd jump back into the cabs and off we went again.

[0:52:45] Lee: Why were you doing this, why were you going to Fossil Bluff?

Clennell: Because we had to have stores to take down there.

[0:52:51] Lee: Store laying?

Clennell: Yes it was for some reason, the ships could never get in we knew that and the alternative to this was, well first I think they wanted tractors down in the Sound for logistic purposes, because the travelling down there was pretty well crevasse free for you know a 150 miles or something, so they could run up and down the Sound on a sort of ferrying basis of depots for the surveyors and people so that was one of the reasons for having Muskegs there. And I gather they went on using them for a long time, but they thought well if we are going to take the Muskegs there we might as well take something useful and so I think we had 3, a train of I haven't got a photograph with me, I had a photograph I think 3 out of 5 sledges had

aviation fuel on and the rest was man and dog food I think? Apart from one little tiny sledge which was that to put our stuff, but of course we could put the bedding in the caboose.

[0:54:10] Lee: Fossil Bluff was occupied by then wasn't it?

Clennell: Yes.

[0:54:15] Lee: By Cliff Pearce, Brian Taylor and John Smith.

Clennell: Various people the geologist had a rotating field worker with him a gash hand. Fortunately I was never posted to do that, because it was an arduous task particularly with one of the geologist, I can't remember his name. He was the sort of person who didn't understand the working hours routine, as far as he was concerned he wanted the job done and if it took the rest of his life so be it! He expected his assistants to follow the same routine naturally.

[0:55:08] Lee: Do you remember who that was?

Clennell: Probably if you told me the names of the geologists sure I could pick it out, but anyway the base was very small very time limited thing and I don't think they wintered people ever again that? [Yes they did, several times]. After we arrived I don't think they wintered people again that I can remember. But it was a sort of ferrying station for the aircraft, in fact the day we arrived at Fossil Bluff they flew in a resupply with the Otters and my dog team!

[0:56:08] Lee: The 'Troggs'.

Clennell: The 'Troggs' they were delivered to me on my birthday which I thought was a pretty unusual birthday present.

[0:56:14] Lee: Did you take to dogs?

Clennell: Well I knew something I'd already experienced dogs on the base at Stonington already and one or two trips with some of the drivers. It wasn't a totally new and useless thing to happen, but I was not, because we'd been out of communication to intents and purposes for this month I'd no idea this was in the wind, I think Johnny Cunningham had said, 'Oh you'll get a dog team probably sometime when down at the Bluff', to actually just having my first cup of tea this plane comes in, and suddenly there's all these dogs bailing out, yapping away! But somebody said 'That's your dog team Jon! It's the Troggs', anyway they were nice dogs!

[0:57:13] Lee: There's an incident, I'm quoting 'Fighter pilot experience while driving dogs on fan trace!'

Clennell: Ah, that might not be immediately understandable? There were 2 principal systems for driving dogs the mechanics, one was you attach the dogs to what you call a centre trace which is self explanatory probably, one long line of rope going from the lead dog back to the sledge not necessarily the same line as a sort of centre line, and then at equally spaced

intervals along the line and matched in pairs you have 2 dogs and 2 dogs attached to how many you had in your team. Which meant that when the lead dog went right, the others had to go right because that's the way the line went! And when the lead dog went left, everyone went left it was extremely efficient in deep snow, if anything could be efficient in deep snow!

But it was more efficient than any other system because you concentrated all the dogs on the centre line, and you had a sort of vector directed on the main line of thrust, the only problem was if one dog stopped then all the rest caught up potentially, and so it was prone to an certain amount of hostile activity between the dogs because they could easily get at each other! I mean they couldn't double back beyond their immediate partner, but it was physically possible to do that if they wanted to crap, they were pretty good at doing that on the move but they were slowing down, the next dog behind caught them up, and bite their tail or something! Or what was worse they'd then gobble up the 'poo' which meant they were slowing down anyway that was the centre trace system.

[0:59:38] Clennell: The alternative was graphically discernible as the fan trace system, in other words you still paired your dogs in the length of rope each dog had but they all had a line back to the sledge. So they could if the conditions warranted it, they could all spread out literally like a fan like the fingers of a glove or something and for me that seemed an ideal compromise if the going got tough they would gradually pull and move into the centre because as they were paired you got nearly the same effect as you would have on the centre trace. But if the going was a bit dodgy, and sea ice was one place it was dogs don't like the ice when it gives way under them. And sea ice used to get puddles on it and thin crusts of ice on top so going across it goes 'click-click!' And their paws would drop through it and would scatter if they could, but if they're on a fan trace they are still running but they wouldn't stop another dog from running, and if they just wanted to crap they could do it and they'd swing out to one side and the other dogs could go past them if they wanted too! You know they might eventually end up getting dragged!

[1:01:09] But the third advantage was on something like crevasses and ice the only way of slowing the thing down you had to have something mechanical a brake on the thing, this was confined to a lever with spikes at the back of the sledge which you sort of trod on to drive the spikes into the ice. But that had two problems one was sometimes the ice was so hard, and all it was doing was scraping along and wasn't really slowing the sledge down enough on very steep ground, and it would catch against an immovable piece of ice or rock and suddenly 'Bonk', your were brought to an instant and very unpleasant halt sometimes!! And so you had to be quite canny with the brake the other trick was the old one, as they used to use on wagons going downhill was to put a piece of rope round the actual runner and so instead of having a smooth slidey surface you have this rope to try and help?

[1:02:25] Lee: So what's this reference to a fighter pilot experience?

Clennell: Well I'm actually coming towards that, and the other braking mechanism is which the fan trace allows you to have as the dogs drop back behind the sledge, and they brake so you've got if you know my dog team was 9 dogs, so you have 9 dogs as well as you on the

sledge trying to stop it or slow it down! None of them may have been all that efficient but collectively it helped hugely, then going across crevasses the lead dog had much more freedom to manoeuvre, as so did the others and if they saw a gap appear in the ice ahead of them they'd leap out of the way. On a centre trace there isn't that same amount of freedom, anyway we found ourselves for a couple of days on a series of glaciers which were windblown as smooth as glass. With apparently very few crevasses until you happened to be riding across these things, and you suddenly realise the ice was going from a sort grey white to dark black! And every now and again a runner would suddenly start slicing through this thin crust bridging the crevasse, and in this case you had to try and put the sledge at right angles to the crevasse and hope to get across this before anything nasty happened!

So 2 days of this and on the 2nd day you know you're thinking 'God this is pretty hairy, how the hell do we get out of this? And we didn't lose anybody yesterday, is today the day!?' Think it happened more than once, but I read this book by a fighter pilot in the 'Battle of Britain', he had obviously been through one of these life threatening experiences his first dog fight, and you know and it left him sitting in a bucket of sweat at the end of the day, and wondered whether he could do it again? And he said after they'd been at it for 3 or 4 weeks it's just a job, he'd survived and so why should he die today? You know and he never thought no more about it and we got to the same situation! But we just realised it was a job you know we'd to commit ourselves to complete, and we seemed to have a technique that so far had worked and why was today going to be the bad day!?

[1:05:28] Lee: I've got time for just one more question really and that's to do with, when you got back you'd obviously had a difficult time down there, and you'd had to make some very important decisions and obviously saved BAS's bacon to a certain extent! Was Fuchs, when you met Fuchs later was he grateful to you?

Clennell: I never met him!

[1:05:45] Lee: You never met him!?

Clennell: No not after that which I thought, I remember commenting to you know my family I suppose at the time. I was rather amazed that you know the Base Leaders weren't debriefed because if you think it's important to collect personal experiences for this project of yours surely it should have been important for the director of the British Antarctic Survey to be getting first hand witness of time down there? But there was a big disconnect really I felt between London and admittedly they had to go through the complicated difficult communications system of Stanley and then on to the bases. Telecommunications was pretty dodgy it didn't always work.

[1:06:53] Lee: There was no way then for your experience to be gathered and communicated to the next batch of recruits? I know you would have a handover with John Cunningham did you have a handover with your replacement?

Clennell: I think I probably did, but I can't remember who it was now? I think I probably I did because there was this delay when I thought I might be staying on for a 3rd year, yeah.

[1:07:23] Lee: But collectively if you weren't being debriefed then there was no kind of accumulation of knowledge or experience?

Clennell: Well one can only assume that yes, which is why I thought it was odd that we weren't, coming from the Army when debriefing was considered one of the, it didn't always happen but it was supposed to! So I thought pretty good reasons, but I thought at least a something like probably a weekend in Cambridge, where we could get together if nothing else over a pint of beer [Lee: Yeah!] or something and just discuss more or less in the it was?

[1:07:58] Lee: How do those 2+ years in the Antarctic rate in the life of Jon Clennell?

Clennell: Oh, probably the 2 with the greatest impact on my life, without any doubt and 'Bunny' Fuchs said 'Don't get any highfalutin notions it's going to be the greatest thing and you going to be hero's and that sort of thing!' I was prepared to go along with that, but he said 'You know it's not going to be the most important thing that happened', he was wrong! I think to almost all of us to a greater or lesser degree?

[1:08:36] Lee: Did it change you, do you think?

Clennell: Yes completely, I had left England as I would say a quite horribly disingenuous young man having no personality of my own, it having been fabricated by school, by the Army and so I didn't really know who I was! And by the time I came back I was actually beginning to find out and I joined the Probation Service, which I would never have had to confidence to do and it was as I say a major life changing period of my life!

[1:09:25] Lee: Thank you for talking about it, thank you Jon.

Interesting sound bites:

- Crevasse rescue of David Benyon at Stonington. [0:18:03]
- Taking over as Base Leader at Stonington and sorting out the field programme. [0:26:40]
- Whisky surplus at Stonington! [0:40:47]
- Muskeg trip to Fossil Bluff and Cuban missile crisis. [0:42:04]