

Arthur Gilmore Fraser.

Edited transcript of interview with Arthur Fraser conducted by Chris Eldon-Lee during the Alnwick BAS Club Reunion on the 21st of June, 2013. Bas Archives Ref: AD6/24/1/224/3 Transcribed by Neil MacPherson on 18.08.2014.

[0:00:20] Lee: Would you say your father was an educated man?

Fraser: Well, he was a self-educated man, perhaps more. I mean he was a bookbinder. I mean his life really centred around books from start to finish. His father was in the printing trade and he then became an apprentice bookbinder. During the depression of the thirties he didn't get a job and so he tramped the Highlands, well sometimes he was on motorbike, selling books for the Gresham Publishing Company; you know, encyclopaedias, dictionaries and so on, to encourage people in the countryside to educate themselves through reading.

[0:01:00] Then he was drafted into the war effort in Glasgow and then after that he got a job in Aberdeen as a bookbinder. And then, when he was made redundant, although he had reached retiring age but a promise was broken and he was made redundant, but he set up his own business with my mother and they were sort of self-employed and he was binding books, theses. He did a lot of work for Aberdeen University and was binding theses up to about his late eighties. But he was a very avid reader, that's the thing – he was well educated in that sense, but mostly self-educated.

[0:01:45] Lee: And entrepreneurial by the sound of things?

Fraser: Well, that's right, yes, he really took a big initiative when he started off on his own because he was very, very upset by the way he had been treated because he had been given what he thought was a cast iron guarantee of work once he reached retirement age but then he was just thrown out, more or less. So, all credit to him really, and he lived to be a hundred.

[Laughter]

[0:02:12] Lee: Do you think that his spirit shaped your life then, because you've also been an adventurous sort of person?

Fraser: Well, I think I take more from my mother actually than my father in many ways.

[0:02:24] Lee: How do you mean?

Fraser: Well, temperamentally I wouldn't say that I had adventurous spirit although once I had gone to the Antarctic I suppose that generated a spirit in me that I wasn't aware of before.

[0:02:40] Lee: It was the geology that came first, wasn't it? Why were you so keen on geology?

Fraser: Well, actually from the age of five onwards I was a very keen weatherman and my ambition was to be a meteorologist. I went up to University to become a meteorologist, but after the second year I realised that the physics and maths were really beyond what would be

needed to be a good meteorologist and by that time I had done two years; geology as well and so it just seemed natural to carry on in geology, which I did. Thoroughly enjoyed it.

[0:03:17] Lee: When was it that you first became aware that there was such a place on this planet called the Antarctic?

Fraser: I think I had been aware of it quite early on. I wouldn't be able to put a date or year on it but I've always been interested in mountains, snow and ice. I had a natural inclination toward, liking for, I enjoyed the Aberdeen winters and sometimes the blizzards there matched Antarctic ones. You know, when I was a student and schoolboy we had phenomenal blizzards in Aberdeen.

[0:03:58] Lee: So, when Bill Sloman turned up at Aberdeen University doing his milk round, were you just shepherded into it?

Fraser: Oh yes, my tutor Kerr Pringle said you must go along and really it was a case of applying for every job that came along and a number of us went. I can't remember now how many of us went but I certainly went and I filled in an application form afterwards just almost out of routine, as it were.

[0:04:26] Lee: So, you weren't particularly inspired by Bill Sloman. For some Fids it was a light bulb moment but you weren't particularly inspired by that afternoon.

Fraser: Not in any special sense. There must have been something though and I suppose I really can't recollect my feelings at the time now but there must have been something that he had said – his description of life in the Antarctic that did appeal to me. Obviously, there was nothing said that put me off or made me say that this is not for me and I just went ahead and applied.

[0:05:02] Lee: Aberdeen winter all the year round?

Fraser: Well, we did have some long winters but then we had some summers too.

[0:05:13] Lee: So, were you called for interview?

Fraser: Yes, oh yes.

[0:05:16] Lee: How was that? What do you recall of it?

Fraser: Well, it was most extraordinary because I had done my individual mapping project as part of my degree course between my third and final year. I went to a remote place called Tomintoul, it was really between Tomintoul and the Cairngorms that I did my mapping. I stayed in a sheep farm, a lonely sheep farm, Blairnamarrow, four miles out of Tomintoul on the Lecht road, the famous Lecht road. It was the first staging post after the Lecht road, this Blairnamarrow.

[0:05:54] When I went for interview, I had to take the overnight sleeper from Aberdeen and again my tutor he was always very careful about details and he said, now Arthur, if you are

having an interview in the morning you must get a bath when you get to London. It seemed all so strange but he gave me details, he said 'When you get to King's Cross, walk up to Euston Station, go to one of the doors on the platform and ask for a bath'. Which is exactly what I did and what happened and I went in and this man came up to me and said:

'What can I do for you, sir?'

I said 'Well, I would like to have a bath'.

'Follow me'. And he took me in and started asking me questions.

'Where have you come from?'

'I have travelled overnight from Aberdeen'.

'Oh', he said'. 'I could detect a Scottish accent coming out. I come from further away than that'.

'Oh', I said, 'where do you come from?'

'Tomintoul', he said. [Laughter].

I said: 'Never! You know I spent six weeks there'.

'Where did you stay', he said.

I said 'Blairnamarrow'.

'That's the house I was born in', he said.

[0:07:03] Lee: Gosh!

Fraser: So, in a sense it was a very strange introduction to the interview.

[0:07:11] Lee: Did Kerr know that? Kerr Pringle?

Fraser: Yes, I must have told him.

[0:07:15] Lee. You were set up?

Fraser: Oh, no, I don't think I was set up. No, I don't think so.

[0:07:22] Lee: And when you got to the interview all posh and spruced up, how did it go?

Fraser: Well I didn't think it went particularly well. I was very nervous, I recall that. And I put things in a way that was in a way a bit humorous but a bit bizarre as well. However, obviously, I suppose, maybe my degree, because I had just had the results of my degree then, had played a big part in that. No, I didn't think that the interview went particularly well.

[0:07:58] Lee: So, were you surprised when you got the letter?

Fraser: Yes, I was surprised, Yes, I was.

[0:08:03] Lee: How did you parents react to the idea of our Arthur going down to the Antarctic for a couple of years?

Fraser: Well, I think mixed emotions. Yes, I think they were very proud and pleased but, at the same time, they were aware of the fact that there were dangers involved and that I would be away for a very long time. But I think that the more positive elements prevailed in their thinking. Yes, I think basically they were very proud.

[0:08:29] Lee: So, even then did you see it as a very good line in your CV when you got back?

Fraser: I suppose so. I don't recall feeling that. I then realised that I was on the threshold of a very big adventure in my life. I then became excited at the prospect.

[0:08:50] Lee: In that gap between getting the letter and the ship, was there any training or preparation?

Fraser: Oh yes, we had to go to Birmingham, that was in July and all the other geologists who had been appointed plus the glaciologist, Denis Ardu, we were all together in Birmingham in the research unit there with Dr Ray Adie as our...

[0:09:17] Lee: So you met him?

Fraser: Oh yes, yes he was my boss really.

[0:09:20] Lee: What did you make of him?

Fraser: Well, he was there at the interview. I can't remember who else was on the interview panel but he was certainly there. He was the main interviewer. I know that ... In the end I got on very well with Ray Adie, I respected him and we built quite a good relationship as time went on. And in a sense I think I responded quite positively to his way of dealing with people, although I know that others didn't, and I could understand that in a way.

[0:09:56] Lee: What made you click then, do you think, compared to others?

Fraser: I suppose it's part of my upbringing, you know: I had to respect authority, even though I didn't agree with them, I had to respect them. That was just the way I was brought up and I think that it was very, very good training. And I just practised that in a sense. I respected him and I did all that he asked me to do to the best of my ability. I didn't confront him if I thought I disagreed with him in any way.

[0:10:33] Lee: I get the impression you had quite a church upbringing. Is that correct?

Fraser: Yes, oh yes.

[0:10:37] Lee: So that would perhaps shape the way you responded.

Fraser: Yes, that's a very important part of my life. Indeed, there is a sense in which, for me being appointed to the Antarctic, was very unexpected in terms of my personality and experience and so on but to me it was a gift from God, it really was, yes.

[0:11:02] Lee: Some Fids have said that they feel that they... Well, I'll quote you an example. 'If God was on earth, he would be in the Antarctic'. Did you sense Him around you down there?

Fraser: Yes, absolutely, but I wouldn't say that I knew God before I went there, so he is not limited, but the thing that really did impress me very deeply was that we're seeing this wonderful, majestic scenery. Man has been seeing this majestic scenery for only a matter of 120 years at that time, 130 years, and I thought to myself that ever since creation, God has been enjoying this himself and all the aspects of the Antarctic. That was one thing that really struck me.

[0:11:51] Lee: It's one piece of the World that is still as he intended it.

Fraser: Well, exactly, you could say that, but just the thought of that, you know, it made a big impression on me that God has been enjoying this part of His creation all this time and Man has only been here just a matter of over a century.

[0:12:10] Lee: Were you able to worship in the Antarctic and, if so, how?

Fraser: Well, I did have private devotions, if you like, reading my bible and praying. There wasn't obviously any opportunity to go to church but there were one or two other Christians, like [REDACTED]. In the first year he was in the Argentine Islands, [REDACTED], and then there was Bob Metcalfe in my second year. [REDACTED] too but I got to know Forres McWhan who was the Minister in the United Free Church in Port Stanley at the time.

[0:12:48] Lee: Forres Mc ...?

Fraser: Forres McWhan. He was a Scotsman and he was the Minister of the United Free Church in Port Stanley and I got to know him on the way down. He said that services were relayed down to the Antarctic bases every now and again. So I listened to them when I could and there was the opportunity.

[0:13:13] Lee: In voice by radio, not just by Morse?

Fraser: No, no, by voice, that's right.

[Laughter]

[0:13:19] Lee: Worshipping by Morse might have been difficult!

Fraser: It would have been, yes, I think so.

[0:13:23] Lee: We haven't got you there yet, so you must have caught a ship at some point to get down there.

Fraser: We went on the *Kista Dan*. That was a chartered ship because of the logistical requirements at the time, especially as we were going to take on board two aircraft at Montevideo to help in the relief of the bases because the previous year had been a very difficult year. In fact, I think one of the bases, Horseshoe Island I think, didn't get relieved at all. So, I was sent down on the *Kista Dan* along with Tal, Brian Taylor, the other geologist. Phil Nelson and Neil Aitkenhead they had gone on the *Biscoe* in October to Hope Bay. But Brian Taylor and myself we went on the *Kista Dan*, we left about the 19th of December, I think it was.

[0:14:25] Lee: And you were destined for Stonington?

Fraser: No, I was destined for Adelaide Island. That was my programme to do two years reconnaissance mapping of Adelaide Island. We were going to establish a new base there, Base T and when we got to Montevideo, our first port of call, then that was where Sir Vivian Fuchs joined us along with, what was his name now – he had been on the British Grahamland Expedition – I should remember his name well. Anyway, they joined us there and also the two crates containing the two aircraft, two De Havilland aircraft.

[0:15:05] Lee: Debenham?

Fraser: No, no it wasn't, it was, oh, Stephenson. What was his first name? [Alfred] He was just known as Steve.

[0:15:16] Lee: I know who you mean, the surveyor.

Fraser: That's right, the surveyor. He had been on the BGLE 1937-38.

[0:15:26] Lee: So you met Fuchs on the ship?

Fraser: Yes, aye.

[0:15:29] Lee: What did you make of him?

Fraser: Well, [Laughter] of course he was still benefitting from all the success of his trans Antarctic crossing and he had a very high profile still in the media and that did have an impact on how things went with us because on the way south, we had relieved the Argentine Islands base and then, rather against Captain Hindberg's wishes we then proceeded south, knowing that ice conditions were very bad because our reconnaissance flight had been made from Base F, using the Beaver on floats.

[0:16:20] Anyway, we proceeded south, well we went away outside the ice pack in Bellingshausen Sea and then after a while we made our way in. But it wasn't long after that before we got into real difficulties, in fact we were trapped good and proper and it looked as though we might even have to winter there. But Sir Vivian Fuchs was on board and he got in touch with... He knew there was an American icebreaker, the USS *Glacier*. It was about a thousand miles away [Laughter]. But he made a request. I don't know the ins and outs of it all, but I do know that what came back to us was that either the Pentagon or the White House

had said to the USS *Glacier* 'Whatever Sir Vivian Fuchs asks you to do, do it. If he asked you to take you into Adelaide Island, go'.

[0:17:18] Lee: Do you suspect that he had this clout because of the TAE?

Fraser: Oh, I think so, yes, I think so.

[0:17:25] Lee: So the Americans were impressed.

Fraser: They must have been, yes, oh aye, that's right. I think it was probably kudos for them that they were being asked to help out.

[0:17:34] Lee: Would you rescue them if they crossed the Antarctic?

Fraser: Yes, that's right. [Laughter}

[0:17:36] Lee: What did you do in the meantime, because it took a while for the *Glacier* to get to you?

Fraser: Oh I know, now that is really the point I'm coming to because it was a difficult time for Sir Vivian. I really did feel sorry for him and in a sense he partly confided in me because he was troubled.

[0:17:53] Lee: By what?

Fraser: Well, we had the RAF men there. We had engineers, pilots and so on. Of course, not only them but I think they were the sort of leaders of the all-night drinking parties in the common room and, unfortunately, the Captain's quarters were immediately above and there was such a racket going on of course, so he couldn't get to sleep. So he obviously complained to Sir Vivian. Sir Vivian tried to deal with the situation. He came down in the middle of the night and pleaded with them to stop them partying, to stop the noise.

[0:18:33] Lee: These were pilots going to the Antarctic.

Fraser: Yes. But of course there were other Fids there as well and they treated him very badly I thought. You know they didn't treat him with respect. They almost made fun of him, which I thought was very poor really. Maybe I'm saying things too strongly but I did feel very sorry for him and in the end he had to actually place an embargo on them. They weren't allowed to have these all-night parties.

[0:19:10] Lee: Did he ban alcohol altogether?

Fraser: No, I think it was just the all-night parties, as I recall it.

[0:19:18] Lee: But presumably the Captain's word was law on ship?

Fraser: Well, of course, exactly.

[0:19:22] Lee: But the Captain would have enforced that?

Fraser: Exactly. Yes indeed. That's why he was in such a difficult situation.

[0:19:28] Lee: So, was there resentment?

Fraser: There was a bit, yes, aye, there was.

[0:19:34] Lee: When you say he confided in you, what do you recall?

Fraser: Well, he was just giving vent to his feelings in a way about how they were losing morale and I think he was worried too about the fact that if there was any emergency arising during the middle of the day, where would the help come from? They would be recovering from their party.

[0:20:05] Lee: Were you allowed out onto the ice at all?

Fraser: Oh yes, we did go out. There was no permission asked or given, we just went out. I suppose we were warned but we did, we had wonderful pictures of the *Kista Dan* stuck in the ice.

[0:20:20] Lee: Did you start to worry about whether you would be relieved? Because you were beset for quite a long time, weren't you?

Fraser: Well, it seemed a long time but I think in the end it was only about two or three weeks. But, initially, I think that when we saw our situation it looked pretty desperate and certainly there were those who were saying we're going to be here for the whole winter and that prospect was very depressing but in the end the pressure on the ice did relax shortly before the American icebreaker turned up but the Captain of the *Kista Dan* he wouldn't hear of going to Adelaide Island. That was it, so we went back to the Argentine Islands and in the meantime Sir Vivian Fuchs had rearranged the programme and the six of us who were due to go into Adelaide Island were to be wintered in Wordie Hut.

[0:21:22] Lee: You would have probably have received an envelope from Ray Adie with secret orders which you opened on the way south. Do you remember that?

Fraser: Yes, aye that's right...

[0:21:22] Lee: Telling you what you were supposed to be doing when you got there.

Fraser: That's right, although I think I knew pretty well in advance as well but I suppose this was just official confirmation.

[0:21:42] Lee: But those were discarded, those instructions...

Fraser: Well, of course, they had to be abandoned, although not entirely. The plan we were to winter in Wordie Hut. One, actually, Ron Miller, he didn't like the plan and so he opted out of it but the remainder of us, the five of us, we did, we stayed in Wordie.

[0:22:06] Lee: How do you opt out?

Fraser: Well, he just said that he wouldn't go. I don't know whether he was reallocated to another base, I think actually he went back to the UK to come back the following year.

[0:22:16] Lee: Right, OK. So you found yourself in Wordie House?

Fraser: That's right. The plan was that the aircraft would winter at Deception Island and then they would fly down in the Spring on the sea ice and then they would ferry all our supplies, dogs, sledges, equipment, everything into Adelaide Island so that we could then fulfil as much of the programme as we could in the time available.

[0:22:41] Lee: So was the time at Wordie Island, at Wordie Hut, was that time wasted?

Fraser: Not exactly, because we learned the techniques of camping and sea ice travel, with all its hazards. We learned quite a bit – dog handling – and actually I was able to do some local geology too, although it was rather piecemeal. It wasn't anything systematic. But while we were still... When the two ships had rendezvoused, the *Kista Dan* with the *John Biscoe*, and of, course there was this disaster...

[0:23:27] Lee: Tell me what you remember of that.

Fraser: Well, I was not there. I was actually in Wordie Hut: I was emptying food boxes and things. But then...

[0:23:37] Lee: How did you hear about it?

Fraser: Well, there were those who witnessed it and they came on later and not long afterwards...

[0:23:45] Lee: You must explain what happened. It was a collision, wasn't it?

Fraser: That's right, they were anchored in the same sort of area in the Argentine Islands and a wind grew up, you know a gale, and the Beaver aircraft was on the well deck of the *Kista Dan*, its wings I suppose must have been overhanging and the *Biscoe* was blown towards the *Kista Dan* and evasive action was taken too late and the wing of the Beaver got tangled up in the rigging of the *Biscoe* and was just ripped clean off and went to the bottom of the sea, or the 'oggin' as it was called then.

[0:24:25] Lee: And you heard that news at Wordie Hut and that had repercussions for you.

Fraser: Well, yes, I think, yes, it had. I don't remember the timing now but I do know that there was an emergency plan put into operation, again with Sir Vivian Fuchs at the helm and he ordered a fresh wing from De Havilland in Canada, arranged for it to be flown to Montevideo. The *John Biscoe* was to go all the way up to Montevideo to pick up the crate and bring it back to Deception Island in order for the engineers to fit the new wing on for the field programme. And all of that was done; I mean it was very late in the season when the *John Biscoe* got to Deception Island. It was May, well into the winter. But the Beaver was successfully repaired, did a test flight. Everything was OK and then the day came when both aircraft came down.

[0:25:32] We had to wait a long time because the weather conditions were very unsettled but Bob Harkness had marked out a very clear airstrip at the Argentine Islands. He had done it very carefully, surveyed it, made sure it was firm and secure all the way. So the two aircraft came down. The Otter landed first and safely, but the Beaver, for some unknown reason, came off the marked track and Bob Harkness said: 'No, you've come off. You have to go back'. As the Beaver was trying to regain the marked out track...

[0:26:17] Lee: Taxi-ing...

Fraser: Taxi-ing. Yes, sorry I should have said that, it went over a concealed soft patch in the ice, down into the water and that of course meant the end of our programme. That's what scuppered it.

[0:26:37] Lee: The people on the plane did survive that, didn't they?

Fraser: Oh, yes, and we got our mail too. [Laughter] But the moment you get salt water into aircraft, then engines are... That's it... There was no way in which it could be...

[0:26:53] Lee: So for the second time, your plans were scuppered.

Fraser: That's right.

[0:26:57] Lee: are you normally a very unlucky man?

[Laughter]

Fraser: I don't know, I wouldn't be a judge of that.

[0:27:04] Lee: But it was remarkably unlucky to have that happen twice.

Fraser: Well that's true, yes. We were very disappointed, certainly. But I think you just have to make the best of these situations. I certainly was able to do local geology and I found some very interesting rock types, rocks and structures in the Anagram Islands. So it wasn't altogether wasted, although it was frustrating but we just had to make the best of it. And, of course, the second year programme was scuppered as well.

[0:27:47] Lee: Sorry, you have to explain that to me, if you wouldn't mind.

Fraser: The second year?

[0:27:52] Lee: Yeah.

Fraser: Oh, well, it's quite a long story in itself. I must have had a letter from Dr Adie and my programme was then to do geological mapping away down south, south of Marguerite Bay, opposite Alexander Island. That would be new ground that had to be surveyed. So that's what I was detailed to do. I remember that when I read the programme, that this would involve doing a lot of sea ice travel over Marguerite Bay and I remember reading about what happened to the BGLE 1937-38, how the ice had broken up. They had got into quite considerable difficulties around Terra Firma Islands and I remember going to see John Green,

Captain John Green, SECFIDS at the time, and voicing my concerns and said that I was really quite unhappy about that prospect of doing so much travelling over sea ice, but he sought to reassure me, he said, 'I think at that time of the year the chances of the sea ice breaking up are very little'. I could take it no further – that was it.

[0:29:23] Well, with everything else it took quite a long time for the sea ice to form properly and we had to do a big depot laying trip to Mushroom Island, 60 miles away, and this time we had Muskeg tractors, two Muskeg tractors and Brian Bowler was in charge of them. He was a Sergeant Trooper in the Irish Queen's Hussars and he took charge of that. But before we went there had been a... The sea ice had broken up and then rafted, refrozen and then snowed over, drifted over and we set off supposedly to do a five-day return trip to Mushroom Island. We immediately got bogged down because the conditions were hopeless for Muskegs. We had two supporting dog teams but the Muskegs couldn't cope with the deep snow and the slush underneath it and we made desperately slow progress. We ended up having one Muskeg to pull another and so we had a lot of relaying to do.

[0:30:42] We camped on the sea ice near Compass Island and took four hours to strike camp because the sledges would sink into the slush, and then freeze overnight. So it was very unpleasant but we eventually made Mushroom Island and then we had to go back to base. The dog teams had to wait for the main party then to go down south towards Alexander Island. Brian identified a problem with one of the Muskegs. The batteries wouldn't recharge, so he said: 'We really have to get back in a day'. The weather conditions weren't promising and I don't know whether we made the right choice, but anyway we set mid-day on this particular day and already there was low drift and the Muskegs were throwing up more drift and, strangely enough, causing the engines to overheat because the drift got into the engine casing, melted and re-froze and prevented proper circulation of the air. We were slowed down and in the meantime the wind was constantly rising and visibility was getting worse all the time. In the end we had to camp on the sea ice near Compass Island, which was precisely what we didn't want to do.

[0:32:10] I think that we all had a premonition that something bad was going to happen. I certainly had. I was sure that I felt the ice move at one point and Brian and I once went out just to see what things were like but there was nothing we could do because you couldn't even see the end of your arm, there was just such a swirling blizzard. But then Howard Chapman in the other tent he shouted to us at one point and said: 'Pack up as quickly as you can', he said, 'there's a big pool of water not far from us and there's a lead behind us'. The sea ice had broken. In effect we were on an ice floe that had been ramped up against Compass Island. So we had to scramble on there but because we were travelling light – we were going to go back to base in one day – we had only very limited food and fuel supplies. However, at least we were on firm ground, we could say that, but we were stranded, we were marooned.

[0:33:16]: I think it was maybe overreacting, but Brian Bowler sent out a Mayday call. That was how strongly he felt of our danger. Of course, there was nobody who could come near to us. [Laughter] We had to leave the Muskegs for the time being on the sea ice even although

there was the risk that they might get lost but at least we got onto the island with our limited supplies and had shelter in our tents. All the ice on Compass Island was impregnated with salt water of course because during the summer the spray would carry the sea water across, which was alright for the porridge, for me anyway. [Laughter] But it was I suppose quite a serious situation. In fact, to the extent that Sir Vivian Fuchs did write to our families, just a low-key letter, just to alert them to the fact that that was the situation.

[0:34:27] Lee: So how long were you there for?

Fraser: Well, again it seemed much longer than it was. I think it was only a matter of two to three weeks before the dog teams were able to come back from Mushroom Islands with supplies.

[0:34:40] Lee: So Vivian was in London writing to your parents.

Fraser: Yes.

[0:34:42] Lee: Oh, I see.

Fraser: Oh yes, yes. This is actually August/September.

[0:34:49] Lee: '61?

Fraser: '61, yes. But it was that time. I think one had to realise this was a serious conversation. Brian was really very concerned about what would happen to us, especially if the food ran out. I don't know what made him think in these terms, but he was envisaging some of us starving to death, and...

[0:35:09] Lee: Well, there's talk of cannibalism...

Fraser: Well, yes, that's right. He said to the others 'If Arthur was to die first', he said. I suppose he thought I was the smallest and the weakest and I would go first. 'I would have no hesitation in eating him if that meant that I could survive'.

[0:35:26] Lee: Was the reverse true?

Fraser: No. [Laughter]

[0:35:31] Lee: Did the Press get a hold of this?

Fraser: Not that I am aware of.

[0:35:38] Lee: So what happened to reverse the situation?

Fraser: As I say, we got supplied in the end by the dog teams. Bill Tracy and John Wigglesworth came up from Mushroom Island. So that relieved the immediate situation. Of course, the sea ice had to re-form between Stonington Island base and Compass Island where we were and that took quite some time. But in the end it did and John Cunningham, the Base Leader, came with Dr Brian Sparke and they were met by Bill Tracy and John Wigglesworth. They went up to Moraine Cove, I think it was, and they got needed supplies from base to us

and then it was just a question of waiting. But in the meantime the programme had been revised. I think there was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing. I think the initial suggestions about what we do were rejected, but in the end there was a plan that was eventually followed, whether it was completely agreed or not, I'm not all that certain.

[0:36:54] But anyway, the new plan was that the Muskeg party would continue to go south once conditions were right, and that I would go back to base along with Roger Mathews. I can't remember who else there may have been. But anyway, a number of us who were due to go south with the main party, we were going back to base. So I simply had to make up my own geological programme but I did so on the basis of what the geologist the preceding year in Stonington had told me, Peter Grimly. He had said to me: 'It would be wonderful if you could go over to the east coast, there's some very interesting geology over there'. He had done quite a bit of the reconnaissance, and so I followed that up and it was the best thing that happened really in the Antarctic, was to go over there and it wasn't so far from base.

[0:37:57] Lee: Sorry, just to go back to your enforced lie-up. Did you at any time fear for your life? Or was Brian being a bit hyperbolic?

Fraser: I think he was. I think when I really feared for my life was when we actually on the sea ice camped in this blizzard, we couldn't see or do anything. There was nothing we could do, we were at the mercy of the elements and, as I say, I'm pretty sure I felt the ice move at one point and of course men had been lost in Marguerite Bay in precisely these circumstances. Yes, I think once we got onto Compass Island... Actually, there is a bit that I have missed out and that is that after a while we were able to go south back to our depot island, to Mushroom Island and then we were there for a long time during an enormous blizzard, 13 days I think it lasted and we were nearly buried alive, Brian and I were...

[Laughter]

[0:38:59] Lee: Tell me about that, because Brian's mentioned this to me as well... A real version. [Laughter]

Fraser: Well, poor Brian was very upset to know that he had no cigarettes, because he was a heavy smoker and he resorted in the end to smoking dry tea leaves in toilet paper but he soon gave that up.

[0:39:27] Lee: Why did you nearly suffocate?

Fraser: Well, that's right: I am just trying to think back. Now, yes there was one point at which we both confessed to having headaches and, you know, not feeling very well and Brian... Well we then discovered that we could hardly light a waxed paper with a match, so we were obviously almost starved of oxygen. We did manage to... I made a mistake in my report there. I checked in my diaries. We were able to open the tent flaps and get some air in but it wasn't long after that when, you know, the snow had accumulated on our tent to such an extent that it formed an ice casing and it was so hard we couldn't get out. We were literally buried, trapped. And that was when Brian, mercifully, had the whistle to alert the others to come and dig us out.

[0:40:23] And that of course was when... You know, Brian was very concerned about his food intake, his proteins [Laughter] he needed proteins, you see, and so once the blizzard had eased and then there were these King penguins just came onto the island, Mushroom Island... [Laughter] and then he said, 'Right – each one of us has got to kill a penguin'. Of course, we didn't have the right equipment for it, you see, I had a shovel. So it was rather disgraceful to do it, so I suppose in the necessity of the occasion, you just do these things in a way that you would never do otherwise. My aim was to kill this penguin outright. To bring my shovel down as hard as I could on the poor thing. I did, but it didn't kill it. It tobogganed away a bit, obviously in pain and that was when I said 'Sorry,' but of course it was a great laugh to the others, saying sorry to a penguin you're trying to kill. That was really why I just regretted that I hadn't killed it outright.

[0:41:34] Lee: Did you succeed?

Fraser: Oh, in the end, oh yes, yes. We put it out of its misery very quickly but I would have preferred to have just killed it outright. It's interesting how in the Antarctic, when you're faced with these situations, you do have to look at things differently.

[0:41:53] Lee: It's different rules, isn't it?

Fraser: Different rules, absolutely, yes. As I look back now I'm horrified that I would have even thought about doing such a thing. I also killed a seal because we needed it for the dogs and I did it single-handedly and, looking back now, I tremble to think about it. But yes, you have to look at things differently.

[0:42:18] Lee: Do you think that's your age or the kind of morals that we live by these days have changed in the fifty years since you were down there? You've got all the... But also society has changed and do you tremble because you're much older now than you were and therefore you realise the errors of your ways or do you tremble because it's no longer acceptable?

Fraser: I would think more the first, yes, definitely, just killing innocent animals like that although it was a necessity or it could be conceived of as a necessity. In fact, that was how I accepted it at the time. It was a necessity because there was no saying how long we might be in Mushroom Island though we had plenty of rations there, but I suppose there was a necessity to get some fresh food if we could. I suppose it was the sort of thing that I would never have dreamt of doing at home. I think it was much more a personal thing.

[0:43:20] Lee: Did you change much in your two years down there, do you think?

Fraser: I think so: I think I changed a lot.

[0:43:25] Lee: In what way?

Fraser: Well, I hope I matured anyway, yes, I think in my first year maybe there was lots of signs of immaturity.

[0:43:34] Lee: Was that because again you were brought up with a very Christian background, sheltered?

Fraser: Yes, I think it was more to do with the fact that it was a sheltered background, brought up in a certain way which didn't maybe enable me to cope too well with the very different world in which I was living. But that was a good exercise; it was a good education in itself. Yes, I think I did change, I hope for the better.

[0:44:05] Lee: So what brought you round, what matured you? Necessity?

Fraser: Well, maybe just the experiences of life because I suppose a number of times I had been faced with death. Away back, for example, just in the early days at Wordie Hut, I went through the sea ice.

[0:44:28] Lee: At Stella Creek?

Fraser: Stella Creek, yes.

[0:44:30] Lee: Tell me about that, Arthur.

Fraser: That was John Green's idea [Laughter]. We were invited for a meal to the main base at the Argentine Islands. We had John Green with us and he said: 'Oh, we'll go across on our skis, Stella Creek is full of ice floes: we can easily go across. And, of course, it was a piece of cake going over. But one person had to stay behind to look after the dog, that was Ted Clapp, the Base Leader. I volunteered to relieve him. I said: 'After the meal, I could come back to look after the dogs and you can go and join the party at Base F'.

[0:45:10] So that was what was done and Jock McCallum came with me just to see me safely across Stella Creek but by this time it was pretty well dark. I had a torch on a ski stick to help me but the tide had gone out, that was the first thing. The quality of the ice floes had deteriorated enormously only in a matter of hours and when I jumped onto the first floe, I could tell at once that this wasn't very good ice. Anyway, I made my way across, gingerly, but then I was faced with an ice cliff because the tide had gone down, out and the ice level had gone down.

[[0:45:51] I shouted across to Jock, I said: 'I'm not going to be able to get onto the island here'. He said: 'Oh well, try walking down parallel to it and see if you can find a place where you can'. But as soon as I started that, touf! [phonetic] down into the water. I grabbed the ice and it broke, I don't know how many times, maybe not many times but anyway that was a very alarming experience. But I managed to just pull myself onto this ice floe and just lay flat.

[0:46:25] Lee: You were there for an hour or so.

Fraser: Yes, although rumour has it, Chinese whispers kind of thing, the *John Biscoe* was still in the area at the time and the news came back that I had been all night on this ice floe.

[Laughter]

[0:46:41] Lee: So how did you get off in the end?

Fraser: Well, once Jock got back to... And he had a terrible struggle. He tried to get to me but he couldn't and he had very great difficulty getting back onto the island, then back to base. I think he was very upset, panicky, and it took quite a long time for him to get out the message. But then Bob Harkness took charge. They had a boat and at the end of Stella Creek it was open water, so they boated across from Base F onto Winter Island with a rope and they just threw a rope to me and that was it.

[0:47:22] Lee: Good job God was on your side, isn't it?

Fraser: Yes, well, that was quite a significant experience because I realised that I had been spared.

[0:47:36] Lee: You saw it that way, did you?

Fraser: Yes, I did.

[0:47:38] Lee: At the time?

Fraser: Yes I did and, in a sense, I just renewed my commitment to God.

[0:47:45] Lee: He had you in this tricky position, didn't he really?

Fraser: Well... Yes... That is how God works, that is how He works but it's all done in kindness, it's all done in kindness. Yes, all since then that's been my overwhelming experience, God's love and kindness and care.

[0:48:18] Lee: He saw you through some other tricky situations too. You lost your footing on the ice at one point in Adelaide Island.

Fraser: Oh yes, that's right. Oh that caused a lot of alarm. They were setting up the new base. This is between the two years, this was on the way to Stonington Island and all the stores had been brought onshore. They were pretty well advanced in the building of the new base at Adelaide Island. It was a rocky promontory, it was the landing place and to make it easier they put a wooden board on, just so you had an even landing. And I was the first to get off, you see, and I jumped off from the launch onto this wooden board but it was actually covered in a thin veneer of ice. I just lost my footing and I was straight into the water. And I suppose I must have gone down quite fast. Of course, I had heavy boots on and I could hear them shouting in anguish on the top: 'Here's a rope, Arthur!' Of course, again, some men had got lost by drowning in that sort of..

[0:49:38] Lee: You actually went under, did you?

Fraser: Oh well under, yes because it was quite a drop down. I would like to say... Eight feet maybe, say, something like that and, of course, as I say, I was fully clothed, heavy boots on.

[0:49:51] Lee: Did you come back up again for the third time?

Fraser: Oh, I came up again, yes. I didn't panic, myself, no. Mercifully, I could swim but again I suppose God's hand was in it.

[0:50:07] Lee: They say that swimming just prolongs the agony, don't they? It's so cold down there.

Fraser: Anyway, it was very straightforward in the end. I just allowed myself to come up and I just tread water then hauled myself up, much to the relief... Of course, they began to tease me immediately: 'That's serves you right for all your whingeing' was what I got. [Laughter]

[0:50:29] Lee: Let me pick on one or two more incidents that you very kindly supplied me with. There's an incident when Tony Quinn had an accident. Now tell me the story there, please.

Fraser: Well, that's an interesting story but there's not much on record about it

[0:50:40] Lee: Well, that's why I'd like to hear it.

Fraser: Aye, because there's nothing in writing about it. The thing was it had to be hushed up really. We couldn't enter it into the base diaries because there was a breach of safety regulations involved in it. So that's why it's not on record.

[0:51:03] Lee: Which base are we talking about now?

Fraser: Stonington. This was after we got back from our two-month depot-laying trip, you know after Compass Island to Mushroom Island and I was preparing the geological programme to go over to the east coast and that involved a depot-laying trip with a dog team. The three who went on that were John Cunningham, the Base Leader, Brian Sparke, the Doctor and Mike Tween, the Diesel Mechanic, he wanted to have just one sledge trip during his time in the Antarctic. And that left three of us on base. There was Tony, the Radio Operator, Rodger Mathews, the Met man, and myself.

[0:51:46] I was just preparing the maps for my trip and when we came up on... You know there was a radio 'sched' every evening at six o'clock or maybe it was sometimes ten o'clock. Anyway, whenever it was, John Cunningham spoke to Tony and we were all listening in as we normally did, listening to the radio 'schedules'. John had said that they had got to Snowshoe Glacier, because they were going to go up Snowshoe Glacier, but they had had great difficulty man-packing the things up the snout of the Snowshoe Glacier. In fact, he said: 'It's so bad that we've decided that we are going to leave behind everything that is not essential', and unfortunately that included the radio transmitter.

[0:52:41] That was the breach. That should never have happened. But it was the Base Leader who took that decision. Well, I suppose you don't think much about these things but it was the very next day, ten o'clock in the evening. Rodger was in his office, I was in mine, Tony was in his shack and there was this huge explosion and Rodger and I rushed into the common-room.

[0:53:10] 'What on earth was that?' We couldn't see anything and then the door opened and in walked Tony. Uh, I tell you, it was the most dreadful sight. Blood was spurting freely from both of his wrists; his hands seemed to be shredded and he was absolutely soaked in blood. I rushed upstairs to the Doctor's surgery to see if I could get tourniquets. I mean, unfortunately, Brian had never showed us round his sort of cabin place and I didn't know where they were, but amazingly Rodger called up at one point and said the bleeding is largely stopped. I could hardly believe it because it seemed to me that both his arteries had been ruptured. Anyway, I went down and, sure enough, the bleeding had reduced considerably. I mean there must have been at least a pint and a half of blood, I would have thought. It was all over. Well the first thing to do was to pump morphine into him, antibiotic, treat for shock. I think if he hadn't had such a strong constitution, he would have died.

[0:54:29] Lee: What had happened to him?

Fraser: Well, he had been tobogganing near the old American Finn Ronne Expedition base on Stonington Island. He liked tobogganing on the Northeast Glacier and as he passed by on one of his runs he saw copper wire. There was some project or other that he must have had in mind or was immediately suggested by the appearance of this copper wire and so he decided to take these coils of it and those cylindrical objects on it he mistook as battery heaters. So he wired them up. Detonators. That was because the Finn Ronne Expedition, they allowed their ship to be frozen in to the sea ice and then they released it by dynamite. So that was the cause of the explosion.

[0:55:24] Lee: So how do you start nursing him back to health?

Fraser: Well, I mean, the thing was he needed a doctor immediately, but there was no way of contacting the doctor. He did go up, bless him, he was as strong to do it, he actually went up after that. I can't remember now whether it was a ... I think he made a Mayday call or something similar, yeah, because I remember Brian Bowler came up from down south. He just said he had a helluva accident and he needed medical attention urgently, I suppose just in the hope that maybe somewhere, somehow, someone would have heard and could come and help. So after we had settled Tony as best as we could... Of course, there was severe shock as you can imagine, Roger and I then had to plan what do we do, how do we deal with the situation.

[0:56:26] We went round the options and Roger said: 'Well, I can go, I shall ski across Neny Fjord and ski up the Snowshoe Glacier. I said: 'No, you can't do that because that's breaking all the safety rules'. But in the end I had to accept that that was the only way. But I tell you I was very, very reluctant and when he set off in the morning as he did, my last words to him were: 'Roger, if the weather turns bad, make sure you come back'. 'Aye,' he said. So the weather did deteriorate. There was always this katabatic wind coming off the plateau from time to time. We knew from experience that it was always stronger in Neny Fjord in the Snowshoe Glacier area than it was at base and we were getting up to 50/60 knots on base, so it must have been at least 70/80 knots in Neny Fjord – you could see the drift as well - and I knew that there was no way in which Roger could ski in these conditions, even on sea ice let

alone on the Snowshoe Glacier. So, all my thoughts were Roger is going to come back. He has to come back.

[0:57:45] But as the day went on I went up to the top of the island – no sign of Roger, no sign of Roger and then darkness fell and that was when my morale hit rock bottom. I could only think that Roger had died, or had come by an accident and I think Tony was very, very worried too and in a sense it was almost an ideal recipe for a totally sleepless night. But that was when I did prove God in a new way, in another way. I described to him – I tell you I was on my knees crying to God – and I had a wonderful sleep that night, just slept like a child. I remember even waking up in the middle of the night. It's almost as though a hand was placed on me: 'Not yet, not time yet'. I slept again and somehow or other, although the situation was exactly the same as the night before I felt differently about it. I don't know why, it had just seemed different. I kept going to the top of the island to look in the direction of Neny Fjord and at mid-day or soon after, two sledge teams in view. Now, how it's happened, I mean it was a sheer miracle because the Snowshoe Glacier is heavily crevassed all through the year and Roger, as I had imagined, I thought, had to walk on the sea ice in Neny Fjord and then walk all the way the full length of Snowshoe Glacier. To me, that's a miracle. He took it very... You know, he was very...

[0:59:23] Lee: Phlegmatic?

Fraser: Phlegmatic, yeah, amazing. So that meant that the doctor was then able to deal with Tony and actually he made a remarkably good recovery, but there was a very important lesson there – don't take needless risks.

[0:59:40] Lee: And don't leave the radio behind.

Fraser: Well, that's what I mean. That was a very bad mistake, really. I don't know how it was but we decided that we ought not to say anything about it, so there's no record of it anywhere.

[0:59:58] Lee: But didn't Tony Quinn have scars to prove he had been injured when he got back?

Fraser: Oh, yes, well there was only a little list on his little finger actually. He doesn't mention anything about it. Tony Quinn, if you look up... At least I did: I Googled his name and he gives an account of his time in the Antarctic, there's no mention of it, no mention of his accident. So he's quite coy about it too.

[1:00:27] Lee: And it was a group decision, not to write it up in the base log?

Fraser: I can't remember exactly now... I think it must have been Roger or maybe it was my own decision, I don't remember that detail. No, I don't.

[1:00:44] Lee: That's exactly why we do this project.

Fraser: Yes. [Laughter]

[1:00:50] Lee: That's a good story, very chilling and well expressed story, thank you very much.

Fraser: Well, of course, John and Brian are long since gone. I don't know what Roger Mathews... I did hear that he also had passed away but...

[1:01:07] Lee: I don't know. There's one more story I must get from you before we come to a conclusion, and this is when you were leaving the Antarctic on the *John Biscoe*, there was a fire.

Fraser: Yes, that's right.

[1:01:21] Lee: Tell me about that, please.

Fraser: Well, we were anchored in Deception Island and somebody had been on watch. I don't remember the name of the man or crewman who was on watch but he was on watch and he wanted to have a fry-up in the middle of the night but he left the fat fryer on, presumably by accident, forgot about it and the next thing there was smoke pouring out everywhere. I was wakened up. I wasn't all that far from the galley and I remember hearing anxious voices outside and people running up and down the gangways. Then I began to smell smoke, so I knew there was something badly wrong, so I quickly got dressed and when I got out there was smoke everywhere.

[1:02:19] They were in quite a state, you know: 'What do we do?' 'Should we tell the Captain, we should tell the Captain'? This kind of thing was going on but in the end one of the cooks, I don't think he was the main cook, but one of the cooks was dealing with the matter with a fire extinguisher. The galley was extensively damaged. If I remember rightly, they said another five or ten minutes and the whole ship would have had to be abandoned. Of course, Deception Island was the right place for it because that's where the sea water is warm [Laughter]. But I think what was much worse was the hurricane at Hope Bay afterwards when we were blown onto the rocks.

[1:03:08] Lee: What do you recall of that?

Fraser: Well, that was one of the most terrifying nights I've ever experienced. The thing is that Captain Kelly, he was very nonchalant. He allowed the ship to be damaged in ways that we thought weren't really right. You know, allowing icebergs to come and banging up against the ship caused dents and so on and so forth, plates were stove in and so on and an iceberg had passed during the evening, had fallen onto the well deck and that was a warning sign, I suppose. But the thing is that he was entertaining Argentineans in the wardroom and I suppose that they were getting rather the worse for drink, but this wind got up later on that evening. And it really did rise very, very quickly and of course Hope Bay is notorious for very strong winds. I mean the fastest speed was 147 mph and that was before the anemometer broke!

[1:04:13] And so I went up to the bridge, the Third Officer was there and I was anxious because my own cabin had been damaged that day with an iceberg that had come up and

clonked it and bits and pieces were falling down, so I was already in a nervous state. I was up onto the bridge and he said I think that we'll have to make for the open sea tonight. I was relieved by that, but in fact it never happened and the wind just got stronger and stronger. It was roaring and the spray was over the ship and, at quarter to four in the morning, I remember it so distinctly, I was looking out of my porthole window and then I realised that all the ice floes, bits and pieces of ice, little bergy bits and ice floes, were moving upwind.

[1:05:07] That couldn't be, there was only one explanation – we had lost our anchorage, we were adrift and the thought was scarcely out of my mind when, 'Crunch', we were on the rocks. We were right below a rock cliff and there was an Argentinean warning beacon flashing above. That was a very terrifying experience, I tell you, I thought that was the end, because it was in the middle of the night as well. The ship just suddenly came alive. The engineers hadn't time to dress properly and they were running hither and thither, got the engine started, it seemed an interminable time but eventually they got off. I was amazed at how they could do it but we did lose 38 tons of fuel, the ship was holed.

[1:05:59] Lee: This was in late '61?

Fraser: This would be February/March '62, maybe, were we into April? No, I think it would be March '62, that's right.

[1:06:11] Lee: On the *Biscoe*?

Fraser: On the *Biscoe*.

[1:06:15] Lee: It's very different these days. It's the kind of general, final question. Geologists are flown in for summer seasons, communications are a lot better. Do you think you would have preferred to work in the Antarctic now compared to then?

Fraser: It's interesting you should ask that because I was just speaking to Alan Precious, I think it was, and we both agreed that we would not like to be working in the Antarctic now.

[1:06:40] Lee: Why not?

Fraser: I think for a variety of reasons. One is that there's much less ice now and that was the great thing, you know, you were really in the land of permanent ice. The Argentine Islands now are almost clear of ice, I believe, so it's far less of what you would want the Antarctic to be. Then the other thing I suppose is that we were living, we were working there at the time of dog sledges, dogs and sledges – far, far better than these mechanised forms, to us, forms of transport. Yes, it sounds strange in a way to take that viewpoint but there was a certain romance about it. I suppose that's the best word to use. There was a romance about the way in which things were done in those days. Of course, you didn't like all the disasters that came along but even then, that is just woven into the tapestry of your experience.

[1:07:48] Lee: You were much more connected, in the early sixties, with the time of Captain Scott than you were with today.

Fraser: True, that's right.

[1:07:57] Lee: The differences between Scott's experience and yours were quite small, I would think, compared with your experience 52 years ago and a modern-day Fid.

Fraser: Yes, I think from a logistical point of view it clearly makes very much better sense for scientists only to go in for a field season, to come out again but they're not experiencing Antarctic life as we did, spending a winter there. That's a big difference, I would say. It's sort of irrational almost to say it [Laughter] but to me it was an experience of life.

[1:08:43] Lee: Well, how does it rate in Arthur Fraser's life so far, those two years?

Fraser: Oh, it rates very, very highly. I'm still selling my Antarctic stories, still showing my Antarctic slides and they're of superb quality even to this day, 50-odd years on. It was Kodachrome 25.

[1:09:01] Lee: You talked about a turning point, both in your maturity and in your faith in those two years, didn't you?

Fraser: That's true. I think my faith was deepened and I can certainly look back on that as a very formative experience. Indeed, I suppose in a sense, as I sometimes put it to people, I feel I had almost the whole of life's experience crammed into two years because it was everything, literally everything. Overall, I would never, ever regret one moment of it. It was a wonderful experience, a great privilege.

[1:09:34] Lee: Have you ever had that itchy feeling about going back?

Fraser: No.

[1:09:40] Lee: Because...

Fraser: It would be so different. There would be much more evidence of pollution, for example, because there are so many going down there now. Maybe I'm exaggerating that, but, no, I've no itch to go back. No, strange isn't it?

[1:10:05] Lee: I don't suppose Edmund Hilary would be in any hurry to go back up Everest now, would he? [Laughter] For the same reason, I guess. It's more a commonplace experience now.

Fraser: Exactly, I mean it's like Piccadilly Circus up there now, isn't it? Well, I saw a photograph – I was amazed, they were all queuing to get up to the summit [Laughter].

[1:10:25] Lee: You see them queuing to get off the ships in the Antarctic to go and send their postcards from Port Lockroy.

Fraser: Well, there we are. Mind you, some of my friends and colleagues they have gone on a cruise to the Antarctic and they enjoyed it. And, yes, to a limited extent it would be quite nice to do that but I have no itch to do it. I've no particular desire to go back. I just want what I experienced of the Antarctic, if you'll excuse the pun, to be frozen in my memory. [Laughter]

[1:11:00] Lee: What a good punch line. Thank you, Arthur, very much indeed.

Fraser: You're welcome.

[0:05:16] A bath in Euston Station before the interview at BAS.

[0:12:50] Church services relayed by radio from Port Stanley to the bases.

[0:13:30] Fuchs plus crates with two aircraft boarded at Montevideo.

[0:16:20] *Kista Dan* trapped in sea ice – assistance called for from the Americans.

[0:23:30] Collision between ships causes damage to an aircraft.

[0:26:17] Repaired aircraft damaged for a second time.

[0:29:23] Difficulties on the sea ice on depot laying trip to Mushroom Islands.

[0:35:09] Talk of cannibalism.

[0:39:00] Trapped in a tent without cigarettes, dried tea leaves and toilet paper for a smoke.

[0:44:28] Near thing – falling through the sea ice in Stella Creek.

[0:50:40] Serious accident at Stonington after hushed-up breach of safety rules.