

DAVID BLAIR

Edited transcript of a recording of David Blair interviewed at his home near Paignton in Devon by Chris Eldon Lee on the 12th February 2006. BAS Archives AD6/24/1/22. Transcribed by Mike Jupp, 12th April 2019. Edited by Andy Smith, 4th October 2019.

Part One

[Part 1 0:00:00] Lee: This is David Blair recorded at his home near Paignton in Devon by Chris Eldon Lee on the 12th February 2006. David Blair, Part One, in which we look through his personal archives.

Blair: I understand that you did an interview with Bob Bond who was a chap I took over from when I went down there and I dug this out the other day when I was looking through my archives and it was a letter which Bob left for me at Deception Island when they flew South to our operating base at Adelaide Island. Perhaps you'd like to have a read of that.

[Part 1 0:00:45] Lee: So it's the 11th of November 1962. What are the key points he makes? Do you remember, David?

Blair: Really he is telling about some spares that he wanted us to take down, for we had spares in the hangar at Deception Island and various things that he wanted.

[Part 1 0:01:07] Lee: So it is a factual, practical letter rather than a love letter or a ...

Blair: Oh! No love letter about it. [Laughter] I hadn't met Bob at that time, in fact I didn't meet him until we eventually sailed into Adelaide Island and he checked me out on the skis with the Otter.

[Part 1 0:01:28] Lee: ... [tape glitch] ... What else do we have in front of us then? What are your prize possessions?

Blair: Well, I've got my log book here, but let's have a look first ... maybe you'd like to have a look through this album [microphone bump]... it won't come out on your recording, but if you'd like to have a quick look through that.

[Part 1 0:01:48] Lee: What am I looking for?

Blair: [sound of page turning] I noticed on Joanna's list here, she asked about what training we'd done before we went down to the Antarctic. We went out, this other chap Bill Stutt who was my colleague out there, he and I went out to Canada to the De Havilland's factory at Downsview and we spent a week going over the aircraft through the factory and we went down to a Canadian Air Force base in ... further down to the east of Toronto, and it was Trenton, actually, and we flew the Otter or we were given a conversion onto the Otter and we did quite a bit of flying there; did about 15 hours and during that time, one of the things that the Canadian Air Force chaps were rather keen on was that we should get some experience in what they called 'whiteout' flying.

[Part 1 0:03:09] Blair: We were out there in the summertime and we couldn't do this because there was no snow naturally [Laughter]. So, what they did was they took us out in an Otter equipped with floats and we flew this off Lake Ontario and it was on the day when there was virtually no wind and it was a glassy surface and which was very similar to flying in a whiteout.

[Part 1 0:03:40] Lee: The reflection of the sun on the water?

Blair: Yes, and virtually no conception of judging height. So, what we did was we approached the surface until we got down to about maybe a couple of hundred feet then we reduced our rate of descent to about 150ft a minute and we just held that rate of descent until the floats touched the surface and throttled back and that was it. This was a similar technique to what we used down in the Antarctic, flying on skis. Whiteout; I don't know if Bob explained this to you.

[Part 1 0:04:23] Lee: Please do.

Blair: But whiteout, this occurs when you've got usually 8-8ths coverage of cloud and virtually no shadows appearing on the surface. So if you are flying in a vast expanse of snow, then you get no definition of height. So this is the technique that we used and we did it down there flying in whiteout conditions and it worked perfectly.

[Part 1 0:04:58] Lee: So you just transferred the technique from this Lake Ontario to the Antarctic ice sheets and you were OK?

Blair: Yes, a similar technique.

[Part 1 0:05:05] Lee: A bit bumpier though in the ice, presumably?

Blair: Er, it depended. If there was a lot of sastrugi around, then it could get a little bit bumpy.

[Part 1 0:05:16] Lee: How did you feel about this at the time? Do you remember, because this presumably was a new experience for you, was it all?

Blair: Well, I did my training in Canada during the war and I had some experience of flying in snow conditions. In fact the last landing I'd had before I got my wings, when I was training, was a belly-landing in a Harvard, where the undercarriage got frozen up and we couldn't lock it down and we had to land on the belly.

[Part 1 0:05:49] Lee: [chuckle] Right!

Blair: Apart from that I'd ... I'd done ferrying Sabres across the Atlantic through Greenland and Iceland and I knew a fair bit about Arctic conditions.

[Part 1 0:06:07] Lee: Is this an Otter here on Lake Ontario?

Blair: It's an Otter yeah.

[Part 1 0:06:11] Lee: Was that your first experience of Otters?

Blair: Yes, we did our conversion on wheels first of all ... In fact, looking at my logbook here ... [sounds of pages turning].

[Part 1 0:06:31] Lee: This is August 1962?

Blair: Yep We went out to ... it was the 24th August we went out there, we started flying.

[Part 1 0:06:43] Lee: But you hadn't really had any Otter experience before that?

Blair: No, no.

[Part 1 0:06:47] Lee: Had you flown single prop before?

Blair: Oh yes.

[Part 1 0:06:50] Lee: You had; was it, was there something new to get used to?

Blair: Ah, well I'd been flying jets. If you look at my logbook for ... in that month I flew Vampires, Jet Provosts and Chipmunks.

[Part 1 0:07:08] Lee: Right! But generally speaking, you took to the Otter quite readily?

Blair: Oh yes, I loved it

[Part 1 0:07:12] Lee: Did you?!

Blair: Yes.

[Part 1 0:07:13] Lee: What was good about it?

Blair: A good solid aeroplane; a very reliable engine, a Pratt & Whitney 'Wasp', 600hp. I have made a few notes here if you are interested in ...

[Part 1 0:07:29] Lee: Do you want to take me through them?

Blair: Yes, give you a quick description of the aircraft: It's a high wing monoplane, fuselage, pilot compartment up front and a cabin at the rear with door which opened and allowed access to items such as dog sledges and things to get in. The engine was a 600hp Pratt & Whitney 'Wasp'; normal fuel load endurance was 6½ hours. We carried survival gear on board the aircraft to the weight of 350lb. That included a small sledge, with food etc; 2 pairs of skis and a sea-survival dinghy, which we needed for flying across Marguerite Bay. You've been to Marguerite Bay haven't you?

[Part 1 0:08:43] Lee: I have, Yes, yes.

Blair: Normal payload with full internal fuel was, (er) it's a long time ago now [laughs] ... I can't quite read my writing, it's ...

[Part 1 0:08:57] Lee: 1200?

Blair: No! Yes 1200lb.

[Part 1 0:09:02] Lee: Did you feel that the safety precautions were everything you'd want?

Blair: At that time I expect we did, I mean we had ... well difficult to say now in retrospect, but what could one expect down there at that ... at that period? We had two-way communications with the bases and that was about it really.

[Part 1 0:09:37] Lee: I think that Bob was saying, from memory, was saying that he had an inflatable dinghy in case of splash-down ...

Blair: Yes.

[Part 1 0:09:44] Lee: ... which was replaced every year and when the new one arrived they tried out the old one and it never worked!

Blair: Oh.

[Part 1 0:09:51] Lee: Is that your experience?

Blair: I never knew that! [Laughter]

[Part 1 0:09:55] Lee: [Laughter]

Blair: Probably just as well! [Laughter]

[Part 1 0:09:57] Lee: [Laughter]. What else have you noted down here?

Blair: The operational task; Joanna was interested in knowing about that and our task was establishment of field parties, air support for the field parties, supplying the Southern bases. You never got down as far south as Fossil Bluff, did you?

[Part 1 0:10:24] Lee: I didn't, no, but you were supply ... you were there the year after Bob Bond, weren't you, I think?

Blair: Yes.

[Part 1 0:10:29] Lee: So you were picking up the work he had done to establish the base?

Blair: Yes. Bob would have told you all about the establishment of the bases, I suppose, wouldn't he? Yes, well, the other thing we did was reconnaissance of project areas and ...

[Part 1 0:10:46] Lee: How do you mean?

Blair: Well, where field parties, like the geologists and surveyors were going, we would do a reconnaissance of the place first, picking out possible landing sites for dropping them off and picking them up when they had completed their tasks. We also did depot laying, that was laying down man and dog food; because at that time we had huskies. And we also collected, ... well we laid down man food, dog food and fuel for the field parties. That was mainly geologists and surveyors.

[Part 1 0:11:36] Lee: So were you constantly finding yourself flying to places you hadn't been to before?

Blair: Oh yes.

[Part 1 0:11:42] Lee: And was this all naked-eye navigation?

Blair: Oh yes, virtually, yes.

[Part 1 0:11:46] Lee: [Laughter]

Blair: [Laughter] We had ADF on board the aircraft.

[Part 1 0:11:54] Lee: ADF is?

Blair: Automatic Direction Finding, which we didn't use much because all our flying was what you'd call on Visual Flight Rules. In fact, if you imagine from the bottom end of Adelaide Island looking south towards Alexander Island, I think that distance was well over 100 miles, and in the morning if we could see the mountains on Alexander Island we could virtually reckon on having 12 hours of reasonable weather. Occasionally, we'd get a bit of sea fog coming up but, you know, we didn't really have to operate in those conditions.

[Part 1 0:12:45] Lee: So, although you didn't have weather forecasting to speak of, you could work out how long you had.

Blair: Oh yes, well in the mornings we did ... we had weather schedules with the bases like Stonington Island and Fossil Bluff, and we'd get all the weather down the in the South; and Stonington could tell us what the weather at round about the middle of Marguerite Bay was, and as I said, we made up our minds, we had our scheds at about 6 o'clock in the morning and we'd lay on our programme for the day.

[Part 1 0:13:23] Lee: And you were flying out of Deception all the time, or you were flying ...?

Blair: No. We ... all the summer operating was done from Adelaide Island, the base right at the tip of southern Adelaide Island. And we had the aircraft ... we had an aircraft parked, with fuel, on the ice piedmont there. And we had a Muskeg for running up and down taking up fuel and delivering stores etc.

[Part 1 0:13:57] Lee: How reliable were they – because I've read conflicting reports – Muskegs?

Blair: Muskegs?

[Part 1 0:14:04] Lee: Yes.

Blair: Well, we had a lot of trouble occasionally with In fact at one time we ... one of the tracks bust on this thing and to put a new track on it we had to undo all the bolts on this thing and I can't remember but it went into hundreds

[Part 1 0:14:29] Lee: ...of bolts?

Blair: Bolts and nuts and we had to undo them all and fasten on the new track and redo all these bolts and that took several days.

[Part 1 0:14:42] Lee: So you wouldn't fly at all at that time; it would be all hands to the pump to mend the tractor?

Blair: Well on this particular occasion it was during a period of bad weather; we wouldn't have been flying anyway and when we weren't flying we used to help the chaps on the tasks around the base.

[Part 1 0:15:01] Lee: On average how much of the time could you fly? Were you able to fly half of the available time? Or less or more ... because of the weather conditions I mean?

Blair: Weather conditions; difficult to say, looking back now, but usually when we had a spell of decent weather we could fly for 3 or 4 days and we could say start at er first flight take-off about 8 o'clock in the morning and we'd finish at 8 o'clock in the evening. But, you know, when the weather got bad, that was when we sort of 'recharged our batteries'.

[Part 1 0:15:43] Lee: So it was feast or famine really.

Blair: Pardon?

[Part 1 0:15:46] Lee: It was feast or famine, was it?

Blair: Oh yes!

[Part 1 0:15:49] Lee: Flying wise! Are there anything else, any of the notes that you want to ...? Let's go back to your photograph album. You only got as far as page 1 on Lake Ontario.

Blair: Oh that was on the Canadian wasn't it? This was taken going down to ... I went down on the *John Biscoe* and we called in at ... I take it Bob gave you all the gen on ...?

[Part 1 0:19:19] Lee: I think you should tell me, if you don't mind.

Blair: No; well, we started off in October from Southampton. We had 21 days to Montevideo. I think we had 2 or 3 nights in 'Monte'. From there it was 4 days from

Montevideo down to Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands. Then we spent I think about a week in the Falklands getting kitted up and rearranging stores etc on the ship. Because as the ship went south we off-loaded stores at South Georgia, Signy Island in the South Orkneys, Hope Bay at the top end of the Antarctic Peninsula. Signy Island, which, I don't know if Signy is still going now, but for some time that was mainly concerned with marine biology. From there we went to Deception Island; that was where we first came across our hangar and, of course, there was no aircraft there because they were down South operating. From Deception we ... during this time, incidentally, we were off-loading stores, which amounted to 2-years' worth of stores at each of these bases. The stores were loaded into the ship's scow, and a motor boat took the stuff in-shore. We were all involved in loading and unloading. It was quite a hefty bit of work.

[Part 1 0:18:05] Lee: So not much flying there then!

Blair: Well weren't doing any flying at the time because we hadn't reached Adelaide Island, where the aircraft were operating from.

[Part 1 0:18:13] Lee: You were heading to the Antarctic for the first time. Can you remember anything of your feelings about going down there; your excitement or your concerns; about taking such an unusual step?

Blair: Well, we knew quite a bit about what we were going to do because before we went down we had a week at the Scott Polar Institute [sic] at Cambridge, the headquarters, well it wasn't the headquarters at that time, for the Survey, but that was where we met all the chaps and we were given a week's seminar on all the disciplines that were operating down there, down South at the time. And we met most of the people who were involved in the Survey on the British side; including civilian folks and one of the greatest chaps that I can remember during that period was Sir Raymond Priestley.

[Part 1 0:19:22] Lee: Raymond?

Blair: Sir Raymond Priestley. He was involved in Scott's expedition, one of his expeditions, and the lecture he gave us during that week at Cambridge was marvellous; one of the finest lecturers I have ever listened to.

[Part 1 0:19:44] Lee: What do you remember from it?

Blair: Well he was, he was leading a party that were cut off and they spent a winter living in, I think, a sort of a refuge that they built and they spent the winter virtually eating seal meat. It was one of the real epics of the ... that's going back to the old heroic days of exploration.

[Part 1 0:20:15] Lee: And he impressed you as a man as well?

Blair: Oh yes! Tremendous fellow! At that time he was, I seem to remember, he was in his early 90s, at that time. One of the chaps who was with us going South was this fellow here, Ken Blaiklock. You've heard of Ken, have you?

[Part 1 0:20:37] Lee: The name rings a bell, yes. Why is he special to you?

Blair: Ken was involved in the Trans-Antarctic Expedition with Fuchs and Hillary and he sledged across the route with a dog-team.

[Part 1 0:20:54] Lee: And why is he in the boat with you now?

Blair: Well, he was heading South on ... I can't remember what project Ken was involved in, but he was doing a survey, I think, on Adelaide Island. But he was a tremendous chap, a real ... in fact there's an island called after him, Blaiklock Island, on the east side of Marguerite Bay. I don't know if you ever came across it?

[Part 1 0:21:21] Lee: Again, I have heard of it. Did it ... what was the man, though ... what is it about the man that you particularly remember; having met him and sailed with him?

Blair: Well, Ken, I would class as one of the Survey's gentlemen; a real decent fellow. And, you know ... we played bridge together and did, you know, during the time, and we had some great times.

[Part 1 0:21:53] Lee: So, you had a little bit of training at Scott Polar before you went down, but the question was about your feelings about going down South; whether you were full of anticipation, excitement or you were nervous about this strange expedition. What do you remember?

Blair: I wouldn't say nervous at all. Having converted onto the aircraft, I looked forward to the job we were doing. The thing that I really did like about this job was that it was nothing to do with what I had been doing previously in the RAF, flying jet fighters and things. And it was ... the job was actually doing something, supporting somebody.

[Part 1 0:22:43] Lee: So it was more creative, more ...?

Blair: Well, I find it creative. And the other thing I enjoyed about this was all the chaps that we met ... some of them were quite a bit younger than we were as pilots and we found that their views on life were entirely different to what we had been brought up to in the Service. And it was the first time really I went straight into the Service from school in 1941 and you know it was the first time I really met people who had a background of what I would call freedom.

[Part 1 0:23:30] Lee: [Laughter]

Blair: In the Service we were regulated by air traffic and ... or senior officers, etc. And down there we were going to be our own bosses. No air traffic to bother us at that time and all the flying we were doing was hands on stuff; and we really did look forward to it.

[Part 1 0:23:56] Lee: A marked absence of red tape.

Blair: Yes!

[Part 1 0:23:58] Lee: Is that why you chose to go? Can you remember?

Blair: It was, in fact, yes. I was doing a job at that time in, at Linton-on-Ouse in Yorkshire, where I was the station test pilot; and my job was being disestablished and I was going to be put into a ground job.

[Part 1 0:24:20] Lee: Right

Blair: One day I saw this notice on the Mess asking for volunteers for the British Antarctic Survey and I thought: 'Right!' [Laughter]

[Part 1 0:24:31] Lee: [Laughter]

Blair: 'At least I might be able to keep on flying.' So, I put my name down and to my amazement, about a fortnight later, I was called down to the Air Ministry for an interview. And when I went down there; at that time I had, I really didn't know a great deal about the Survey or what have you, but when I went on the interview there was a Wing Commander in charge of the Board and Sir Vivian Fuchs, and er Johnny Green, who at that time was the Operations Director. Did you ever meet Johnny Green?

[Part 1 0:25:08] Lee: No! But I know who you mean, yes.

Blair: And, we went through; they asked question about career etc, etc. And the thing that always stands out in my memory about the interview was ... we got on quite well with Fuchs, seemed quite an easy chap to get on with; but at one stage he said to me 'I see you are married, Blair.' I said, 'Yes, sir.' And he said 'What does your wife think about this?' And I said 'Well she is threatening to divorce me.' [Laughter]

[Part 1 0:25:48] Lee: [Laughter] What did your ... was that Peggy, then? What did Peggy think of that?

Blair: Peggy thought I had volunteered for somewhere up in, somewhere up around the Shetland Islands, in the north of Scotland.

[Part 1 0:26:01] Lee: Was that because you fed her misleading information, or ...?

Blair: No. We had a house in Scotland at that time and I was ... I had been stationed in Scotland at Leuchars and I was travelling up and down at weekends from Yorkshire and apart from going to be disestablished from flying, I had been fed up with travelling up and down at weekends to home. I thought 'Well it's something different; try that.'

[Part 1 0:26:42] Lee: Try commuting from this one. So, so not to put too fine a point on it, how did you break the news to Peggy?

Blair: Well I said I .. I told her first of all that I was going into the Air Ministry for an interview. I said I haven't got a hope in hell of getting [Laughter] this job. Anyway a fortnight ... I think it was about ... I got back to my station about a week or so and I got this signal saying 'You have been chosen.' I discovered subsequently that I was

the third choice. The original chap who had been picked first, he withdrew for some reason and I was, sort of, the third bloke on the list ...so, but ...

[Part 1 0:27:35] Lee: We are going back in time slightly; but it doesn't matter too much, but just to fill in your ... a bit more about your career with the RAF. You joined in '41. Did you actually see active service in the Air Force?

Blair: Well, I don't know if you want to break off for a little bit at this time, but if you'd like a quick read through that.

[Part 1 0:27:54] Lee: Well, because it's all history, I thought I'd ask you the question.

Blair: I see, yes.

[Part 1 0:27:58] Lee: So, you've obviously .. I'll come back to that book shortly, perhaps. But in the meantime, just give me a quick thumbnail of your RAF career prior to seeing that notice on the board and heading South.

Blair: Well, I joined the Service in 1941 straight from school.

[Part 1 0:28:16] Lee: So you were 18

Blair: 18, and I did my initial training in Canada, came back to this country and I wound up ... did the operational training on Spitfires and to my horror having completed this, I was posted out to India. It took us 6 weeks, via on a troop ship, going out to India and then we were dumped in a pilots' pool in Poona and I was there for about 6 weeks. And at that time, I think there were only about 3 Spitfire squadrons operating and they weren't having any losses at that time and we were just stuck there. And eventually Another time when I replied to a notice on the notice board, it called for volunteers to go on Vengeance dive-bombers, so I was selected for that and went up to the North West Frontier, at Peshawar, where they had an operational training unit. Completed that; and I wound up with a dive-bomber squadron in Assam. And we were operating against the Japanese round the Imphal area.

[Part 1 0:29:36] Lee: In Nagaland? In Nagaland?

Blair: No no, Assam, up in the North East of India, near Imphal, and I operated there for some time and eventually when the Japs .. We had pushed the Japanese down through the Imphal plain and we were pushing them back towards Burma, and we were told that the squadron was being withdrawn at that time and the squadron was going to convert onto Mosquitos. So we were withdrawn from the Front at ... in the North East and we went back down to India and we got stuck there for, I think, about a month, and it was just at the beginning of the monsoon period and we weren't getting much flying or anything. There was no sign of these Mosquitos arriving, but, 5 of us were suddenly detached to the West Africa to carry out experimental work on DDT spraying. This was quite unusual at that time because out in the Far East our Army people were ... the majority of the casualties really were being caused by malaria and the powers that be in this country decided that they'd better find out some method of dispensing with mosquitos.

[Part 1 0:31:04] Blair: So, we went to ... we flew 5 of the aircraft from the airfield we were at just outside Bombay; we flew 5 of the aircraft across to West Africa and we were joined by a ??? [unintelligible] from Porton Down which was the chemical warfare outfit and they marked out areas of jungle, went in and counted the mosquitos etc and we went and sprayed them. We did this for 3 months and at the end of that we were supposed to go back to India to convert with to the squadron. (Excuse me a minute.) [Pause] Yes, we were suddenly called in one morning and our boss said to us 'There's a ship out there, chaps. You are on your way back to UK.' And all the crews on the detachment were shovelled off back to UK and we arrived back in Liverpool on Old Year's Night, 1944. We were given 14 days disembarkation leave and at the end of that I was recalled. I think I was given, I got 10 days eventually. I was recalled and given a very swift conversion on to Typhoons. And I think I was given about 12 and half hours conversion time on the aircraft. I fired 8 rockets; I never fired the cannons; and I was shipped out to Holland; joined the Typhoon squadron in Holland. In fact there were 3 of us from the squadron joined and on the first day that we operated, one of the chaps was shot down on his first trip.

[Part 1 0:33:11] Blair: And that's another story. I won't bore you with that one. But anyway, I flew with 183 Squadron and we switched from rocketing to dive-bombing and we flew right up through Holland, Germany and I wound up in Germany at the end of the war at Wundsdorf. From there we were ... the Squadron was joined to 11 Group to a base just outside Winchester, a place called Chilbolton, and there we converted back onto Spitfires. We had those for about 2 or 3 weeks, then we got the first Tempest 2s. And we were to be one of the squadrons designated to go back out to the Far East on the Japanese thing, because the Japanese war at that time was still going. You know, we weren't all that keen on that, but eventually, when the Japanese war finished, I ... in fact that was the day I met my wife in Winchester; we met on VJ Day.

[Part 1 0:34:28] Lee: So after all that, the Antarctic didn't hold too many horrors for you then really?

Blair: No, and from there I went to ... That's right; I decided that I wanted to stay in the Service then. I'm not going on too long ...?

[Part 1 0:34:41] Lee: No, it's fine. I'll move you along now, if I may.

Blair: I decided that I wanted to stay in the Service anyway, but after that I did 4 years of instructing, at basic instructing and from there I did a conversion onto jets. I went onto Vampires and I flew Vampires out in Germany again for two and half years. Then after that I was posted to a ferry squadron at Abingdon and from there we spent a year of ferrying Sabres, which the Canadian government had presented us with. They gave the RAF 400 Sabres and we ferried them from Canada to UK. After that, I was posted to Headquarters 12 Group, my first ground job, which I thoroughly enjoyed because I was flying all weekend, looking after ... My job there was looking after the weapons training of the auxiliary squadrons at that time; I was flying all over the country and on to the Continent. So I quite enjoyed that one. After that I went on to the Air Fighting Development Squadron at the Central Fighter Establishment. I had two and half years there and after that I was given another ground job and I became Flying Wing Adjutant, no Weapons Officer, at RAF Leuchars. That's when I first

moved to Scotland. From Leuchars, when I completed there, I was posted down to this place at Linton-on-Ouse and that's where I ...

[Part 1 0:36:29] Lee: Saw the notice?

Blair: Saw the notice, [laughs] about going to the Antarctic.

[Part 1 0:36:35] Lee: Alright, we are in the Antarctic, and these photographs would have been taken in 1960, what year are we talking about now?

Blair: '62. These were in '62. This was where on the piedmont there, where we had our aircraft. This flag, incidentally, is now up at London Colney.

[Part 1 0:36:56] Lee: At where?

Blair: At London Colney where the Otter has gone.

[Part 1 0:37:00] Lee: Oh right! This is the UK, United Kingdom flag.

Blair: That's right.

[Part 1 0:37:04] Lee: That was flying above ... above your landing space at Adelaide?

Blair: That flag marked our fuel depot. We also used the flag as a sort of wind sock.

[Part 1 0:37:19] Lee: I'm not going to have time to look at all these days, so do you want to pick on a couple of classics perhaps?

Blair: OK.

[Part 1 0:37:27] Lee: These were all taken by you or your colleagues at the time?

Blair: Yes. Yes most .. This is Ken Blaiklock again. Abe Lincoln who was .. who spent the time with Bob Bond.

[Part 1 0:37:40] Lee: Oh yes; yes.

Blair: Abe apparently died last year, which, I ... Bob probably told you about that.

[Part 1 0:37:48] Lee: No he didn't, no.

Blair: This was a fellow Fifer who .. this chap did quite a number, thousands of miles sledging down in the Antarctic, Ron Tindal. I flew him down to Fossil Bluff on occasions. This was me with a ...

[Part 1 0:38:07] Lee: With a beard? You were flying dogs around as well, were you?

Blair: Oh yes.

[Part 1 0:38:12] Lee: Was that something that was er ...?

Blair: That was ... My first experience of flying the dogs was quite amusing. The way we flew them ... sorry ...

[Part 1 0:38:25] Lee: Fine, fine, carry on.

Blair: The way we flew them; we had a dog sledge right up the middle of the cabin and the dogs were pegged down round the cabin. And usually, I think there was a team of about 7 dogs and they would be pegged down all round the cabin. And we had the dog handler and either a geologist or a surveyor usually with the team, including all their man boxes and dog food etc. But the first team I flew was going from Adelaide Island down to Fossil Bluff. I was flying along and I suddenly felt something warm on my thigh and I looked down and there was this huge head of a husky and he had pulled his collar right round the cabin and rested his head on my thigh. He must have been absolutely choking himself but he spent the whole trip like that. And looking down at this dog, he only had one eye. He was an old chap called Steve and he was one of the loveliest dogs I have ever come across.

[Part 1 0:39:44] Lee: Was he the leader?

Blair: He wasn't a lead dog at that time but he has a history, which I could go into, and tell you later on; it's a most interesting history. But I ... He was pensioned off into the old dog team at Deception Island at the end of this particular season. And I used to go out on skis with him on a rope.

[Part 1 0:40:14] Lee: On Deception?

Blair: On Deception Island.

[Part 1 0:40:16] Lee: For recreational purposes?

Blair: Oh yes. This is one of the depots that we laid up in the Batterbee Mountains, just to the east of Fossil Bluff. That's on the plateau about 4000ft above sea level.

[Part 1 0:40:30] Lee: These are just simply wooden crates held together with wire and stacked up to about the height of a man and then a couple of very high ...

Blair: That's right.

[Part 1 0:40:38] Lee: ... poles twice as high.

Blair: These are all man food and dog food boxes.

[Part 1 0:40:43] Lee: Would that have become snowed over, would it?

Blair: During the winter time. I don't really know, because I think that this depot had been started the previous year and usually we try to lay them in places where the snow wouldn't accumulate too much round them.

[Part 1 0:41:07] Lee: Again just one or two of your highlight photographs:

Blair: That's one of the dog teams. This was at Fossil Bluff. This is King e VI Sound.

[Part 1 041:22] Lee: These are lovely black and white photographs taken with what, David? Do you remember?

Blair: I had a ... - Gosh, can't remember what camera it was ... it was a Japanese thing ... Canon. It was a Canon. This is one of our dogs that had pups down on the base at Adelaide Island.

[Part 1 0:41:41] Lee: For somebody who spent most of his time flying, you obviously had quite an affinity with the huskies.

Blair: Oh yes. These were the pups 6 months from after they were born there. This is me on Guébriant Island ... Adelaide Island you probably remember that. That was one that was climbed by John Green and a company of Marines from *HMS Protector*. The first season that we were down there, we stayed in this hut which was called Stephenson Hut and we stayed in the loft. That's what it looked like We slept on the floor in the attic and we found ... I found it personally quite inconvenient because we would be flying, say from 8 o'clock in the morning until 8 o'clock in the evening, and next door there was an office with a couple of typewriters, when the chaps we brought back from the field would be sitting chattering all night and typing up their reports, whilst we were trying to get some sleep [Laughter]. I had occasion to write to the Operations Director and suggest that the following season the Air Unit would occupy this hut, which was called ... Oh gosh, I cannot remember the name of it ... and there was a new accommodation hut being built which ... This is it here ... And suggested that the Air Unit for the following season, we would operate from this hut and be self-contained, doing our own cooking and etc. We weren't trying to divorce ourselves from the rest of the base team, but it was something we felt we needed to get sufficient rest in, during the periods when we weren't flying.

[Part 1 0:43:49] Lee: So relationships between 'fliers' and 'non-fliers' was fairly cordial most of the time?

Blair: Oh yes.

[Part 1 0:43:56] Lee: All the time?

Blair: Yes. Yes, we got on well with all the chaps on the bases. This was our dentist, who went down with us, Dave Benyon. That was me having a tooth filled. I had lost a filling [Laughter] during the winter. And our diesel mechanic spent the winter putting temporary fillings in for me! This was the actual dentist operating in the Mustang garage at Adelaide Island.

[Part 1 0:44:25] Lee: And he was putting in a permanent filling?

Blair: Yes.

[Part 1 0:44:28] Lee: How much fear was attached to, not going to the dentist, but the one thing that you couldn't do ...? Whilst you were isolated down there and if

anything went wrong with your body, particularly over the winter, there wasn't a lot anybody could do about it. Was that something that was always at the back of your mind? Did toothache worry you?

Blair: Well, before we went down, everyone was ... in fact before I went down, I think all the fillings I had were all renewed and inspected by the Survey dentist in London before we went down. Unfortunately, one of my fillings dropped out, probably due to the low temperatures. [Laughter] And this was the result.

[Part 1 0:45:13] Lee: So it was standard practice, was it, that new recruits had their fillings checked out, before being sent South?

Blair: Oh yes, very much so. In fact, on the Argentinian base and the Chilean bases on Deception Island all the chaps before they went down South all had their appendix removed.

[Part 1 0:45:36] Lee: That's beyond the call of duty, surely?

Blair: Yes.

[Female voice (Blair's wife?):] Are you boys waiting for your break yet?

[Part 1 0:45:43] Lee: Shall we take a break?

Blair: If you like. OK.

[interruption for refreshments being delivered]

[Part 1 0:45:46] Lee: Thank you very much, Peggy. Thank you

Blair: I am sorry, I have been going on a bit...

[Part 1 0:45:48] Lee: No. It's exactly what you are supposed to be doing.

[Part 1 0:45:50] [End of Part One]

Part Two

[Part 2 0:45:52] Lee: This is David Blair recorded at his home near Paignton in Devon by Chris Eldon Lee on the 12th February 2006. David Blair, Part Two.

[Part 2 0:46:05] Lee: David, let's pick up from where we left off, if we may. There are one or two little anecdotes that you mentioned whilst you were having your coffee break. First of all you mentioned about flying coal around. Tell me about that. You mentioned about flying coal around and you had a nickname.

Blair: Oh yes. Well, one of the tasks we had in resupplying the Southern base at Fossil Bluff was resupplying the coal stocks. We carried coal in double-skinned hessian bags, and I think if I remember correctly, they weighed, each bag weighed 34lbs. And I can't remember off hand how many we carried, but we had a full load and at the end

of it, we, our faces were pretty black, like coal men. At that time we reckoned that we must have been the highest paid coal men in the world.

[Part 2 0:47:11] Lee: There's also a story about flying the dogs above a certain altitude.

Blair: Well, during the summer, when the dogs were all pegged out at Adelaide Island, they were fed on raw seal meat. And raw seal meat, when it goes through the gastric system, what comes out the other end is rather, oh say, nauseous, and flying or climbing up, going through 5000ft approximately, climbing up to 10,000ft to get over the Antarctic Peninsula, the dogs' gases in their stomachs swelled and the stench that came out was almost unbelievable. On the first trip I did with Abe Lincoln, we wound up with our noses stuck outside the side windows [Laughter]. It was so bad; it really was quite nauseating.

[Part 2 0:48:21] Lee: You'd rather have a frost-bitten nose, would you?

Blair: Well, I say that 'tongue-in-cheek'.

[Part 2 0:48:31] Lee: [Laughter]. Tell me about Abe Lincoln, because you have mentioned him several times now.

Blair: Abe Lincoln was a New Zealander, Royal Air Force pilot and Flight Lieutenant and from his ..., the history I can remember of his service career, he flew Sunderlands with Coastal Command and before he joined the Survey he flew Shackletons on Coastal Command work.

[Part 2 0:49:03] Lee: And what sort of man was he to work with? You knew him.

Blair: Great chap! I got on very well with Abe, nice chap; very keen worker; very dedicated to the job; and he certainly put me right in many directions.

[Part 2 0:49:18] Lee: How do you mean?

Blair: Loading the aircraft; loading the boxes; getting dogs on and off; how to load the sledges, etc; and, generally showing me the local area. Almost what you'd call a sector recce; he took me to Fossil Bluff, then Stonington Island and we had one memorable trip where we were trying to get a dog team, or 2 dog teams over onto the East coast of the Peninsula. And we started off in gorgeous weather from Adelaide Island, we climbed up to about 12000ft and when we got onto the East coast we started to encounter cloud and Abe let down on DR position and as we got lower and lower it started snowing.

[Part 2 0:50:21] Blair: It became quite obvious to me ... I thought that we were not going to see any surface going down into this. We had 294, the other aircraft, in company with us and we lost him. He couldn't keep contact with us on the descent, with all the snow, and eventually I said to Abe, 'Hey let's get out of here'. And we packed up and had to climb back up. [phone rings] On the climb, climbing back up, the other aircraft, 294, which was the older aircraft, had some difficulty getting, regaining altitude; particularly picking up a little bit of snow on the ... Fortunately the

icing wasn't building up to any great extent, but it was sufficient to reduce the rate of climb on 294 to, I think somewhere in the region of about 100ft a minute. He had quite a job getting enough altitude to get back across on to the West coast.

[Part 2 0:51:36] Lee: But you both made it, obviously!

Blair: Oh yes, we both made it back, but had we continued our let down I am sure that both of us would have crashed.

[Part 2 0:51:47] Lee: [Laughter] Did you fly most of your operations with Abe? Was it a partnership?

Blair: No. What happened was, when we arrived at Adelaide Island, Bob Bond, who was the senior pilot, I don't think he was the senior pilot actually; but Bob checked me out on the skis; did a few circuits and landings round Adelaide Island and after that Bob, who had done 2 winters and a couple of ... about 4 summers down there, I think he'd had quite enough and he took himself off and joined the *John Biscoe*. The other pilot who went down with me, Bill Stutt; he had an unfortunate accident. We were out on a run with the dogs one day and he fell off the sledge and broke a rib, which put him out of action for some time and during that period Abe kept on flying and did most of his ... took over most of his tasks. When he recovered, when Bill Stutt recovered, Abe then took himself off on to the ship and we were left, the two new boys more or less, continuing to the end of that season.

[Part 2 0:53:53] Lee: Am I right in thinking that you always flew in pairs, you never fly solo?

Blair: No, oh no ...

[Part 2 0:53:29] Lee: Was that written down somewhere, or just common sense?

Blair: Well, during the second ... well at the end of our winter at Deception Island, we had the aircraft pegged out outside the hangar and we had weather schedules from the Falkland Islands and we prepared our own prebaratic charts and we had weather schedules with Argentine Islands and Adelaide Island to get weather to do the ferry trip from Deception back down to Adelaide. Whilst we were waiting for this weather we had unfortunately a severe, I wouldn't say a gale, it was a storm blew up. Wind was gusting up over 90 kts and both the aircraft were quite badly damaged. The tail elevators and the tails, the rudders, actually, were so badly damaged that it put the aircraft out of action. Fortunately, we had sufficient spares in the hangar at that time. We managed to get 377 back into action. And unfortunately, we had to wait until we got spare parts down from Canada to replace the broken bits on 294. We had to wait for the arrival of the first ship to bring these bits down for us. These spares were delivered from de Havilland's in Toronto down to Montevideo and they were collected by er I think it was the *Shackleton* that brought the bits we needed and she was the first ship that got back in to Deception.

[Part 2 0:55:34] Lee: But even then, there was no temptation whatsoever to fly solo in ...?

Blair: Well we would have done but, there was a ... We were informed by the Survey that unless both aircraft were serviceable, that was it.

[Part 2 0:55:48] Lee: You couldn't go at all?

Blair: Well we did in fact. We carried out ice recces with 377 for the ships to get in delivering the spares.

[Part 2 0:56:01] Lee: But the principle was that you had to have a second plane on standby, before you could go somewhere?

Blair: Ideally, yes.

[Part 2 0:56:10] Lee: Right, but that was broken when you were desperate for these spares?

Blair: Occasionally we flew both aircraft. In fact it was only one occasion I think where you will see on the photographs there, both aircraft. That's at Deception Island. In transit we flew the aircraft together as much as we could. But, otherwise, it was individual trips.

[Part 2 0:56:46] Lee: I got the impression from somewhere that the two planes would never fly side by side anywhere because they both could get caught up in the same weather. They were always at the opposite end of the run? Would that be true, or is that not your memory?

Blair: Didn't work out that way with us [Laughter]. On the transit, there's a picture showing the transit. That was us going North back to Deception Island. That's Mount Francais on Anvers Island there ...

[Part 2 0:57:15] Lee: And both planes side by side, flying together.

Blair: Yes, yes.

[Part 2 0:57:18] Lee: I guess that was in perfect conditions.

Blair: That was. We wound up, incidentally, on that trip, down to 500ft crossing out from the Peninsula across the water to Deception Island.

[Part 2 0:57:34] Lee: There's mention in 'Ice and Men', that some of the pilots likened it to bush flying. Does that ring a bell with you? Is that something you accept?

Blair: Yes, I would say so, yes.

[Part 2 0:57:45] Lee: What is there about bush flying which is similar to the Antarctic?

Blair: Well, more or less you're, you are on your own and fortunately, we didn't have, touch wood, we didn't have any real, serious engine failures. We had occasionally, on 377, we had what we call a live magneto, which is, the magneto is permanently live

and when the engines get cold the propellers have got to be turned by hand and turning the propellers with a live magneto was almost ... You can expect to have your head chopped off. [Laughter]

[Part 2 0:58:36] Lee: Were there hairy moments, moments that when they had passed, you thought to yourself 'Well that was lucky.'?

Blair: Yes, we were ... In fact there was one day we were heading down to Fossil Bluff and Bill Stutt, for some reason, was behind me and I was just coming up onto the shelf ice in King George VI Sound and Bill was roughly abeam Stonington Island and he called me up and said 'Hey' he said 'I've got a smell of burning in the aircraft; it's on fire.' So he said 'What shall I do?' And I suggested that it would be a good idea if he diverted to Stonington. But the burning went away; it was an electrical fire and whatever it was it burnt itself out. But that was the nearest what I think I can recall.

[Part 2 0:59:42] Blair: The other hairy one we had was at the end of our first season when we were flying back to Deception Island. We started off in absolutely 'gin clear' weather and as we headed north by the time we got up past Argentine Islands it was pretty obvious that we were running into a form of low pressure, or a front. As we started descending and when we got up to 'this position here' [paper rustling] to head across the Bransfield Strait, we wound up down to about a couple of hundred feet and we were dodging icebergs and we were getting a build-up of ice on the wings and it got so hairy that we said 'Right, that's it, end of trip'. So, we had to 180, backtrack and fly all the way back down to Adelaide. That flight took us, I think it was six and a half hours.

[Part 2 1:00:51] Lee: To get nowhere?

Blair: We were airborne; we got to within, we got up to there, which was about 20 miles short of Adelaide, to Deception Island, and that was it, bang!

[Part 2 1:01:05] Lee: You had to fly back out of the weather again.

Blair: We had to fly back out of the weather. And when we got back to Adelaide Island, down here, the weather was gorgeous again.

[Part 2 1:01:15] Lee: Did you come across any maintenance headaches with the planes?

Blair: Yes. During the second season we were there, 294 developed severe oil leaks and we wound up changing 3 cylinders in the field. And that took us ... I think that took us nearly a fortnight, working with mechanics, working out in the field. We wound up with our feet in the ... [distracted by the dog] We had a pool of oil under our feet; roughly halfway up to our knees. And we could only work when the wind was below about, we could only work when the wind was about, below about 2 kts. If it got over 2 kts, that was it; it became too cold for the mechanics to handle the tools.

[Part 2 1:02:23] Lee: When you say in the field, you literally mean in the field, or do you mean Adelaide or do you mean ...

Blair: At Adelaide, which I would say was in the field.

[Part 2 1:02:33] Lee: And routine maintenance? Presumably, icing was a problem all the time was it, or not?

Blair: Icing? Yes. If we were laid up for a couple of days and we wanted to start flying again, we'd find that the aircraft was covered in snow. We had brushes, which ... we had to climb up over the wings and knock all this ice and snow off before we could even think of flying.

[Part 2 1:03:01] Lee: And the cold temperature operations, would that affect the diesel or the oil or other fluids in the plane?

Blair: Well, the fuel that we used, all came down on the ships in, I think they were 80 gallon drums. And these were pumped by wobble pumps, from the ..., straight from the cans into the aircraft. The system, the tankage in the Otter was a little bit difficult because hand-pumping this stuff became a bit tricky. So I devised a method of clamping a filter onto the wing struts and we pumped fuel from the cans up into this filter and it came, fed down by gravity into the tanks. And it made the job quite a bit easier. In fact, on one trip, I had water in the fuel system and it caused severe back-firing. It was on a trip when we were going, trying to take one of the dog teams over to the East coast. And we got up over the middle of the Peninsula and the engine suddenly stopped firing for a few seconds, then it would go off again with a mighty bang; it's obvious signs of water in the fuel system.

[Part 2 1:04:51] Lee: How were the dogs reacting?

Blair: I was a bit too concerned at the time to worry about the dogs [Laughter]. On that occasion, I thought it was prudent not to continue across the plateau onto the East coast and I diverted into, onto the glacier at Stonington Island, where we drained the fuel filters.

[Part 2 1:05:17] Lee: So, you had to filter the fuel before it got into the plane, and the best way of doing this was to pump it up and let it drop down through the plane's wing supports through a filter in there somewhere?

Blair: Not in the filter; we had a hose attached from the filter which we directed into the tanks.

[Part 2 1:05:37] Lee: Right, OK. [Pause] How were the Otters to handle in the Antarctic? Were they good at being in those cool conditions?

Blair: Well, an Otter with a full load. taking off say, almost at sea-level at Adelaide Island ... To understand the aerodynamics of flying with a full load, there is what you call a drag curve and you've got to get on the right side of the drag curve to get any speed going. Having taken off from, say, the likes of Adelaide Island, we had to fly at continuous maximum power for about, well, maximum continuous power for about 5 minutes to get over the hump as it were on this drag curve. Once you got over the hump, and the aircraft would settle down quite nicely and cruise along quite well.

[Part 2 1:06:44] Lee: So was that heart-in-your-mouth time? Often? Occasionally?

Blair: Not really, no.

[Part 2 1:06:51] Lee: Because you knew it would be alright?

Blair: Just knew it was one of the things you had to do.

[Part 2 1:06:55] Lee: And once you were up there, were they light to touch?

Blair: Oh yes. In fact, the er ... When we flew we always had a second ... another person in the second pilot's seat and I think quite a few of the Fids we taught to fly straight and level. [Laughter]

[Part 2 1:07:18] Lee: That was unofficial, I guess!

Blair: Well ... I suppose it was really [Laughter].

[Part 2 1:07:25] Lee: Did the Fids actually jockey for position for the opportunity to fly with you?

Blair: Not really, I don't think.

[Part 2 1:07:36] Lee: There was no sort of clamouring for a trip out?

Blair: Occasionally, when we were doing air tests, say from Deception Island, at the end of the servicing season, some of the ... We gave all the chaps on the base a good run around and they liked to come out and have a look at the ships from the air.

[Part 2 1:08:04] Lee: We talked about a little bit about taking ... well, coping with risks as they cropped up. Were there any occasions where you took a risk knowing it was a risk beforehand?

Blair: Yes, I remember the final trip that I did from Fossil Bluff. If you can imagine Fossil Bluff sat at the bottom of, er or at the side of a ridge and there was a lot scree blown off that onto King George VI Sound. And during the summer time, where all this scree landed it caused melt and if you could imagine: it formed pools, undulating pools, and we found that we had to, having landed at Fossil Bluff, to find a place to take off that was relatively smooth, we had to taxi quite a long way down the Sound. But towards the end of the season I remember the last take-off I did, I was jolly glad [Laughter] when I finally got airborne. And Bill Stutt, who was flying with me that day in 294; he broke one of his skis on the final sort of lurch before he got airborne.

[Part 2 1:09:33] Lee: This was because there was water there, forming? No because he was going too ...?

Blair: Because it became so undulating everywhere. It wasn't like sastrugi; this was real sort of dips in the ... If you can imagine a runway with great hollows suddenly appearing; rather like that.

[Part 2 1:09:53] Lee: Then again, you had no choice but to leave? You didn't want to spend all winter there?

Blair: No. We had horrible thoughts of: 'If something goes wrong and we prang on this, that's it; we are stuck here for the winter.'

[Part 2 1:10:08] Lee: But you wintered on Deception, didn't you? How was that for you? What was it like psychologically, knowing there was not much to do now until ...?

Blair: There was plenty to do. We had all the maintenance on the aircraft to do. And we ... In the hangar we had a little sort of caboose at one side, and we had, I think they had 2 or 3 paraffin stoves going in this and we kept them running 24 hours a day. And if you imagine the amount of moisture that comes off burning paraffin, at the end of the winter the inside of this office was covered in ice. During the ..., when the engineers were working on the aircraft, the other pilot and myself were virtually tool boys and we kept heating up tools on these stoves and rushing out into the hangar to give to the engineers and retrieving them when we got called.

[Part 2 1:11:15] Lee: Why was it good to have the tools warm? That wasn't just for comfort?

Blair: It was necessary. I mean, if you handled metal at temperatures below zero, the metal would stick to your hands.

[Part 2 1:11:30] Lee: So, there were no gloves involved?

Blair: On some occasions when, you know, it wasn't possible to ... Part of the maintenance they were doing, they couldn't do it with gloves on. We did have a hot air machine called, we called it the Noko [phonetic] and it was a bit of a devil this thing. [Laughter] To start it up in below zero temperatures it was like ..., if you've ever had experience in lighting a primus stove, it was similar to that. We had to pre-heat the burner on this thing with methylated spirits and if we didn't get the temperature right, once this thing got going, occasionally we got a huge backfire, which just about blew all the windows out. [Laughter]

[Part 2 1:12:29] Lee: You showed me a letter from *Antarctica Calling*; this is the radio programme. And you are on the receiving end of this, weren't you? Tell us about that story.

Blair: Well, during the winter months, BBC World Service, I think, at that time, they produced a programme 'Calling Antarctica' and it came out every Tuesday during the winter months and it went through each base; all the personnel on the base, went through, everybody alphabetically and there were messages sent from all the relatives who wished to participate. So every Tuesday night all the chaps used to congregate after the evening meal and listen to the ... And it involved not just the base you were particularly based at; all the other bases. We got all these personal messages, which some were quite funny, and others were pretty awful. One friend of mine got the unfortunate news that his father had died. And that put a real damper on the things.

[Part 2 1:13:55] Lee: This was transmitted on the wireless? This was how he learned, knowing that everyone else was hearing the same thing?

Blair: Yes

[Part 2 1:14:03] Lee: Tough, isn't it?

Blair: Yes. The other thing that we ... During the evening we had schedules where we could speak to the other bases like from Deception Island in the winter we could speak to for instance Halley Bay, which was at the other end of the Weddell Sea. We could speak to the base at Hope Bay, Signy Island, Argentine Islands and the chaps at Adelaide and Stonington and as far as the Bluff.

[Part 2 1:14:37] Lee: You'd all be listening at the same time on Tuesday night to *Calling Antarctica*?

Blair: Oh yes.

[Part 2 1:14:42] Lee: I think your number came up once, didn't it?

Blair: Yes, and like everybody else it was quite embarrassing, but ...

[Part 2 1:14:50] Lee: Why was it embarrassing?

Blair: Well, just, you know, hearing a voice that you knew and some personal things that come out and you feel yourself sort of cringing a bit ...

[Part 2 1:15:03] Lee: This was Peggy going into the BBC at Edinburgh?

Blair: No, no. They, the BBC chap came to the house and did the recording at home.

[Part 2 1:15:16] Lee: Oh, right.

Blair: And I think that this was prevalent throughout the whole programme. But on top of that, as I was mentioning the other bases, we used to have the schedules, the evening time when bases spoke to each other, it was called to Goon Show [Laughter]. And there was a lot of badinage sort of going around. It was quite good fun.

[Part 2 1:15:43] Lee: We were talking about looking after the planes and the work you were doing in the winter and presumably there was some work to be done as the flying season approached, which would have to be ... The planes had to be reinstated; I think they were partly dismantled, weren't they?

Blair: Oh no. The only thing we had to do, as far as the aircraft was concerned was: to get the aircraft into the hangars we had to take the skis off. We taxied the aircraft up to the hangar right into the hangar door, virtually; then the skis were taken off and the aircraft was jacked up and put on big cradle things with castors on them and they were manhandled into position in the hangar, pushing them on the base. When they were

doing that we had quite a lot of manpower on the base because the wintering party, we only had 10 people there.

[Part 2 1:16:40] Lee: So that the planes would come out before the ships arrived?

Blair: Oh yes.

[Part 2 1:16:45] Lee: And how ...?

Blair: In fact, if we, if the aircraft hadn't been damaged at the end of my winter, we would have been off flying in, er probably about the end of July. In fact we didn't ..., finally we didn't get airborne until, I think it was into December.

[Part 2 1:17:10] Lee: Oh really? As late as that? So you were waiting for spares?

Blair: Yep.

[Part 2 1:17:10] Lee: Frustrating?

Blair: Very frustrating! I mean, when we surveyed the damage caused by that gale, it put the real thought 'My God, how are going to get over this?'

[Part 2 1:17:29] Lee: And presumably, Fossil Bluff and Adelaide Island were waiting for you to turn up with post and ...?

Blair: Oh yes.

[Part 2 1:17:38] Lee: Yes, frustrating for them too ...

Blair: In fact, during that winter, we had the dentist chap, that I showed you operating on my teeth there, he fell down a crevasse at Stonington Island and this other chum, friend of mine, Ron Tindal, put 32 stitches in his head. He nearly bought it, this chap. He laid in the bottom of this crevasse for quite a long time.

[Part 2 1:18:11] Lee: So, you are wintering in Deception for rather longer than you hoped because of the shortage of supply... of spare parts? Joanna seems to think that you might have one or two more short stories about that winter period in Deception?

Blair: One of the things that we did, actually, I don't know if Bob brought this up, but about, one of the big chores in ..., down South was getting, cutting snow blocks to put in the melt tanks to provide water for cooking and washing. At Deception, we had a Met man who figured that if we dug a well we could have fresh water. We decided at a meeting one Saturday night, we thought 'Let's have a go at digging this well.' And we had a chap on the base at the time, a chap called Dick Stocks, who was one of the FIDS builders who was an ex- ..., worked on diamond mines in South Africa or gold mines. I can't remember which but eventually it was decided we'd have a go at digging this well.

[Part 2 1:19:28] Blair: John Tait was one of the chief movers on this and we cut out, made a trapdoor in the bathroom, a fairly wide trapdoor, lifted that up and we started

digging. And we had, we dug with 2 ice axes and Fondu Cement buckets, which were about a couple of feet deep and about maybe a foot or so wide. And we had, we started down and eventually we got down to about, I think we were down to about 18ft. And as we went down, this chum, Dick Stocks, getting wood and stuff from the old whaling factory at Deception, he shored the ...; he shored the well up as we went down. But it was a bit horrible, being down there; the chaps up top, who were pulling these buckets up and down sprinkled the odd bit down on your head [Laughter]. You thought 'Christ, this is going to collapse.' [Laughter] A bit of a claustrophobic feeling.

[Part 2 1:20:44] Blair: Anyway, we went down. I think we got down somewhere around about 20-odd feet and we suddenly hit solid stone. And we thought 'What are we going to do now?' And we had no way of discovering how big this stone was and eventually we found the edge and this chum Dick, Dick put a concrete collar round the thing and the well actually moved sideways about 3 feet. We went down the side of the stone down to about 24 ft and we struck water. It transpired that this water was fresh and it was at a constant temperature of 56 degrees.

[Part 2 1:21:39] Lee: Gosh, so ...?

Blair: We thought 'Great, we've got fresh water' and we had to dig down another 4 ft to build a sump. And we thought 'Great, all we have to do now is pump this up to the surface.' And that's where the problems started. We started with a manual wobble pump and we found that we could only carry the water up so high with this and the pump had to be primed every time. It became really quite a chore. One of the chaps on the base discovered that in the attic of the old hut there was an electric pump. [Laughter] So we got this pump mounted on the concrete collar, that we'd built on the way down, and we were pumping water up. The strange thing about, with this was that we'd discovered that the amount of water that we held in the sump depended on the tide. At high water, the level of water backed up into the sump, but at low water all the sump emptied. So we wound up having to do all our pumping at high water.

[Part 2 1:23:00] Lee: Even though it was fresh?

Blair: Yes.

[Part 2 1:23:03] Lee: How unusual!

Blair: Now the Chilean Air Force base on the island, they were so impressed with this well, that they got round to digging one, but when they got down to below the melt level, below the permafrost, got into their thing, their's was salt water.

[Part 2 1:23:21] Lee: Really, and they were not far away?

Blair: No.

[Part 2 1:23:26] Lee: So, the inspiration was vindicated, but it was lucky, was it?

Blair: I think in many ways we were lucky because we had Mount Pond behind us. You probably recall that from your visit to Deception, and the melt stream underneath the permafrost obviously came, ran down and into the bay.

[Part 2 1:23:51] Lee: And this water was drunk or washed in or ...?

Blair: Oh yes. It was perfectly fresh water and we used it for washing, bathing and cooking.

[Part 2 1:24:03] Lee: And no more needing, ... you no longer need to go outside and cut ice or snow?

Blair: No. It was absolute ...

[Part 2 1:24:09] Lee: All mod cons?

Blair: Yes, it was great [Laughter]. We eventually had, somebody else found great lengths or coils of poly what do you call it polythene piping? Polystyrene piping?

[Part 2 1:24:25] Lee: Polyurethane?

Blair: Polyurethane, sorry. And, we had the electric pump attached where we could switch over from the melt. We pumped into the melt tanks in the bathroom and the kitchen. And by switching valves we kept those tanks filled. Marvellous!

[Part 2 1:24:48] Lee: Did the pilots have to do their turn at cooking?

Blair: Oh yes. During the winter we had what we called a sort of gash roster and you started at the bottom end of the roster cleaning out the ..., keeping the corridors clean, and coal had to be ... One of the other duties, was bringing coal in for the week. One, we had a bar at Deception Island which we kept going very nicely. And every week we had a ration of spirits and beer. And on Saturday nights we used to start off with a darts competition.

[Part 2 1:25:38] Lee: Oh, really! I've not heard about this!

Blair: Oh yes. [Laughter] We ran this darts competition every Saturday night and it became quite a sort of needle matches and at the end of the season, or the end of the winter, most of the chaps could throw quite a reasonable dart.

[Part 2 1:25:53] Lee: Was it to become an international competition from time to time? Chilean and Argentinian bases?

Blair: Not as far as the darts went. But we used to ski around the Island to visit the other 2 bases. We'd start off one day and ski round to the Chilean Air Force base, spend the night with them, then go right round the other side of the Island and spend maybe a night or two with the Argentine Navy. But the Argentinians were great because they had deep freezers full of proper Argentinian beef steaks, and being able to eat beef steaks was absolutely marvellous. But towards the end of the winter the Argies, I think their deep freezers went for a burton and they wound up having to eat seal meat, like we did [Laughter].

[Part 2 1:27:04] Lee: What ... your time ... You were there for one full ... Let me get this right: you were there for over a year, for about 18 months in total. You didn't stay for a second winter?

Blair: No.

[Part 2 1:27:16] Lee: Was that part of the plan? Or was that a change of plan?

Blair: Well, when Bob and Abe were down, they spent two winters there and there was a change of plan. Whether it came from the Air Ministry, I don't know, but we were only scheduled to go there for the one winter. As far as I know, they kept to that.

[Part 2 1:27:29] Lee: How did you feel about that life as your time down there came to a close?

Blair: Well, obviously I was looking forward to getting back again, back home to the wife and children.

[Part 2 1:27:53] Lee: So, when you came back, during that period were you still always an RAF employee?

Blair: Oh yes!

[Part 2 1:28:00] Lee: You hadn't been seconded or ...?

Blair: Oh well we were seconded to the Survey.

[Part 2 1:28:08] Lee: So, what happened to you when you came back? How did your ...? What was the next step in your rather unusual career pattern?

Blair: Interview at Air Ministry, they said where are you going next and I was told ... I decided when I was down there that I felt I'd done my time in the Service. I didn't think I was going to be promoted to any great level and having tasted freedom from discipline etcetera, I decided that my next posting was probably going to be my last. So, I wanted to be back near my home and I got a posting to Leuchars. I spent my final time in the Service at RAF Leuchars as the Flying Wing Adjutant.

[Part 2 1:29:10] Lee: So, you stepped out of the RAF; at what age would that be approximately?

Blair: Gosh ... '65, I retired at 65, I must have been ... '65 ...

[Part 2 1:29:28] Lee: Well, you would be in your late 30s I think.

Blair: That's right, yes. I retired at 42 I think. Yes, I was 42 when I retired.

[Part 2 1:29:37] Lee: From the RAF, and then what?

Blair: After that I went, I became a civilian flying instructor. I took a civilian licence and I spent 15 years, no, 14 and a half years instructing at Air Service Training at Perth.

[Part 2 1:29:57] Lee: So a lifetime with planes, then, really?

Blair: What?

[Part 2 1:29:59] Lee: A lifetime with planes and you still have connections with the flying world now?

Blair: Yes

[Part 2 1:30:04] Lee: What sort of ...

Blair: When I got a bit long in the tooth instructing at Perth, I managed to get a contract flying out in Saudi Arabia for 3 years with an English company. And at the end of that I er at that time er I don't think that there were all that many pilots of my sort of age and I found when I came up to the age of 60 one was no longer able to occupy the left hand seat on public transport. It was OK instructing so I managed ... By this time I was sort of running down a bit; I did a lot of part-time instructing with the Exeter Flying Club and Airways Flight Training at Exeter.

[Part 2 1:31:03] Lee: Some people I talk to regard that their time in the Antarctic as a real special part of their life. How do you view it?

Blair: Oh yes. It's something really, that I would've hated to have missed. I look back on it with great fondness.

[Part 2 1:31:21] Lee: What is it about it, which you are glad you didn't miss? Is it this word freedom you keep using?

Blair: I'm sorry?

[Part 2 1:31:29] Lee: What is it about it, that was so special? You mention the word freedom ... Was it freedom? Two or three times you mention that.

Blair: Freedom; it wasn't all freedom but it was mostly being able to be your own boss, more or less.

[Part 2 1:31:47] Lee: Did you feel – again this is something that one or two people have spoken about – apart from the obvious beauty of the place, did you feel any other kind of inspirational or spiritual input from your time in the Antarctic?

Blair: Yes, well. On each base, they had very comprehensive libraries and during my winter down there, I read practically every book that has ever been published on the Antarctic and, you know, one felt being a part of it was great. For instance, I don't know if you've heard anything of the Finn Ronne expedition on Stonington Island? You have? Well, even, mentioning things like: you've probably heard of Jennie's Bog, there, Jennie, gosh, memories ...

[Part 2 1:32:43] Lee: This is the American Commander's ...

Blair: Yes, that's right, wife ... Jennie Darlington, I think it was ...

[Part 2 1:32:48] Lee: That's it. Yes, well done!

Blair: So the old brain's still fairly active. [Laughter] Yes, er, having been around, and feeling to have been a part of that sort of thing, and er the other great chap, gosh, Lincoln Ellsworth; you've heard of him? He was great er what do you call it ... his icon was Wyatt Earp. He flew across the Atlantic, the Antarctic, carrying Wyatt Earp's two revolvers.

[Part 2 1:33:30] Lee: So is this sense of connection with a very special group of people perhaps? Or a special part of our heritage? Will you go again?

Blair: Well, since I stopped flying, I have had a quadruple by-pass and I don't think that anybody, insurance-wise, would look at me twice now. Apart from feeling quite fit, but er, but I would love to go down again, yes.

[Part 2 1:34:05] Lee: One of the Otter planes that was left at Deception has now been removed from the Antarctic and has come back to this country. Does that have any special feeling, meaning for you?

Blair: Yes, I should look forward to seeing it again. But having seen the picture of it taken lying abandoned outside the hangar at Deception Island, I'll be quite amazed if they get it back to looking like its former self.

[Part 2 1:34:34] Lee: What if they got it off the ground again, would you go up?

Blair: Not in that one! [Laughter]

[Part 2 1:34:40] Lee: Why not?

Blair: Well it was getting a bit tired when I left it! [Laughter]. I think it was, er I don't know how many engine changes it had, when they finally packed it in. But I think the airframe was getting a little bit tired as well. But there has been so much vandalism carried out on the thing that virtually all that was left there was a shell. Did you get that impression?

[Part 2 1:35:07] Lee: Yes, yes very much so.

Blair: But it is amazing what these aircraft restorers can do these days, extraordinary! Did you ever come across or hear of George McLeod?

[Part 2 1:35:21] Lee: No, tell me, tell me.

Blair: George was ... spent the winter at Fossil Bluff, during the winter I was down there, and early in the season he and a chap called, oh gosh, Ralph er, Ralph Horne, who was a geologist. He and George were sledging down King George VI Sound.

And, what they used to do in the mornings: they'd sort of, get the sledge going, all packed up, the sledge going and they would go on until what they called their smoko, that was the early morning break. They'd stop and have their break and at that, during that period they'd peg the dogs down in the snow and they would carry on. They had been doing this, going up this glacier and being in the glacier region, Ralph was skiing ahead of the dogs and he was attached to the dog lead, or the lead dog, with a long rope and he was sort of going along on his skis and he was suddenly jerked off his feet and he looked back and the dogs were fighting, as they do. There was a great mass of dogs all having at each other and he thought 'What the heck is George doing?' And he went back, no signs of George. George had disappeared!

[Part 2 1:37:07] Blair: It took him, he reckoned about 20 minutes to sort the dogs out and get them pegged down; and he couldn't see any sign of George anywhere, so he attached himself to the sledge with a rope and skied back along the tracks and he found a hole and George had disappeared. What had happened: they had stopped for the smoko and when they started off again, normally the chap driving the dogs attached himself to the sledge, with a carabiner thing, and he'd forgotten to do this and he fell down this crevasse. Ralph had no idea how deep this thing was, or where George was. And he got up to the edge of this thing and shouted down and his voice just ... There was no reply, and he thought 'Oh my God, I have lost him'

[Part 2 1:38:11] Blair: Anyway, he got the dogs sorted out; got them back to the edge of the crevasse and fortunately he had lots of rope and he let down a length of rope with ... You've heard of these it had these Jumar climbing stirrups? It's a sort of stirrup thing that you attach to a rope; it's got loops on it and you stick your feet in and you work your way up the rope. Anyway, he lowered this rope with these two stirrups on it and went down, still shouting – no reply – and he said, eventually, he said, he felt this rope tauten and it became obvious that George was attached to the other end of it and was climbing up. But as he climbed up, the rope cut into the lip of the crevasse and he got up right to virtually the shoulder of thing and couldn't get through.

[Part 2 1:39:14] Blair: He was so weak by this time and he was bleeding profusely from a big cut in his cheek. He'd also hurt his shoulder on his way down. And they managed to get into voice contact. And George said to Ralph, 'I'm sorry', he said, 'I can't do this anymore', he said. 'I am having to go down and rest.' And he disappeared back down the crevasse again and he waited, I think, for about half an hour. And he started climbing up again; and he got back to the same place and just couldn't get any further. And eventually Ralph unhooked the dogs, got them up and he pulled George up through the lip, like a cork out of a bottle. But he was in quite a bad way. He'd broken his shoulder blade and he was quite gashed around the cheek.

[Part 2 1:40:21] Lee: That was whilst you were down there yourself?

Blair: This was before we arrived down at Adelaide Island. So, my trip down was the first time that George had seen anybody since this accident and I flew him straight back up to Adelaide Island.

[Part 2 1:40:41] Lee: To see a doctor?

Blair: Yes.

[Part 2 1:40:43] Lee: Yes.

Blair: But he was jolly lucky. In fact, he and the other chum, David Benyon, they both fell down crevasses, both were extremely lucky. In fact, one of the chaps who sailed down in the *Biscoe* with me to where he left us at Port Stanley and he joined the *Shackleton* and they went to Halley Bay and we heard during the winter that this lad had gone out sledging with his dog team and where no at the beginning of the summer and he'd gone out sledging and the piece of ice that he was sledging on broke off and he disappeared out to sea and never seen again. Dreadful.

[Part 2 1:41:35] Lee: So, you were aware all the time you were down there that sometimes people didn't come back?

Blair: Oh yes.

[Part 2 1:41:41] Lee: But that never really worried you?

Blair: I don't think that you tend to dwell on these sort of things.

[Part 2 1:41:48] Lee: You were slightly invincible, I expect, at that age, are you?

Blair: Oh, I think so, yes. But no, it was great. I learned a heck of a lot down there. We had a little Irish joiner who was involved in, with this other chap I was telling you about, Dick Stocks, building the huts. And this chap was amazed to discover that I knew how to use a set square, and he said 'What? You can do that?' you know. But I was, you know, quite proud. They had a porch at the entrance to this hut and I double-glazed it. All my own work you know, marvellous!

[Part 2 1:42:32] Lee: Shall we ...?

Blair: Yes.

[Part 2 1:42:34] Lee: Thank you very much indeed!

[Part 2 1:42:39] [End of Part Two]

ENDS

Possible extracts:

- [Part 1 0:38:25] One-eyed dog in the cockpit.
- [Part 2 0:46:05] The highest paid coal men in the world.
- [Part 2 0:47:11] Smelly dogs above 5000 ft.
- [Part 2 0:53:29] One plane damaged; both grounded.
- [Part 2 0:58:36] A couple of hairy moments.
- [Part 2 1:08:04] An undulating runway at Fossil Bluff.
- [Part 2 1:18:11] Digging a well on Deception Island.
- [Part 2 1:38:11] Dogs pull a man out of a crevasse.