

## Oral History Recording

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*N.B. This transcript is an edited version of this recording, and is suitable for virtually all reference purposes. While this transcript avoids many repetitions and stumbles in the original recording, the recording must remain the final arbiter. One section has been removed from this, the current 'public domain' version.*

**Bob Whittock** was employed for the winter of 1955 as an Ionosphericist on a one-year contract. John Smith was Diesel/Electric Mechanic, having already served the first year of his two-year term at Deception Island: Bernard Taylor was Radio Operator, having previously served at Deception Island in 1953. On two-year contracts were Bill Etheridge, employed as an Ionosphericist, having worked as such at the ionospheric station in Port Stanley and previously at Port Lockroy in 1952, and Alan Carroll, Base Leader.

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Chris Eldon Lee: *This is Bob Whittock, recorded at BAS HQ in Cambridge, by Chris Eldon Lee on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 2009: **Bob Whittock**.*

**Bob Whittock:** Robert John Whittock – Robert John Whittock, Bob – and place of birth, South Wales: Abertillery, South South Wales, Monmouthshire.

Chris Eldon Lee: (00.23) *And what was your birth date?*

**Bob Whittock:** 7 – 7 – 1930...

Chris Eldon Lee: (00.29) *Right...*

**Bob Whittock:** So on the seventh of the seventh 2007, I was 77. [*Chuckles*]

Chris Eldon Lee: (00.37) *And you are a few days short of your 79<sup>th</sup>, then?*

**Bob Whittock:** 79<sup>th</sup> on Tuesday.

Chris Eldon Lee: (00.43) *You are looking well then.*

**Bob Whittock:** Well thanks! I feel fair, but there are one or two problems that we all seem to inherit at this time, under your age, you know...

Chris Eldon Lee: (00.53) *Do you think any of them are due to your time down south?*

**BOB Whittock:** No, I don't think so – no, not at all

Chris Eldon Lee: (00.57) *Tell me about what you were doing before the Antarctic loomed in your life.*

**Bob Whittock:** Well, I was in the Navy before I went south...

Chris Eldon Lee: (01:09) *Conscripted, or a volunteer?*

**Bob Whittock:** This was National Service, so it was conscription, but a little deviation from the normal because I was apprenticed designer at the time and I'd been there two or three years, struggling through, looking at sunshine through the Birmingham grimy windows, and decided this wasn't for me, and I hadn't signed officially my papers (this is two or three years after I started) so I saw this as a get-out: nobody else knew about it, and when I was called in to register – you have to register before National Service, I don't know if you remember, I went down there and I sort of gave them all my details and, later on, they sent for me to go into the Navy – and my boss said 'You can't go, you're apprenticed' and I said 'Oh, I didn't realise about that,' so they then looked deeper into it and he said 'My God – you haven't signed the papers!' [*Chuckles*] And I said, 'What am I going to do? And he said, 'I'm afraid you're going to have to go, and then come back when you've finished, and finish off your apprenticeship.' And I said 'Oh Yes, OK.' So I was glad to get out through the doors and into the sunshine.

So that was going into the Navy, after my apprenticeship. I came out [of] the Navy, took on another job in designing, in shopfitting, until that got the better of me. Then I wrote to all and sundry, to join the Palestine Police, and Australian outbackers and whatever, and managed to get an interview with the Falkland Island Dependencies Survey, of which I'd never heard anything of, and was completely convinced that the Falkland Islands were off the coast of Scotland, like everybody else, pretty well. I'm sure half of those people that went down with me thought the same thing: we were put right here in Cambridge, of course, when we met up with Dr. Fuchs and some experienced people. But that led to the old *John Biscoe* on the fourth of October 1954.

Chris Eldon Lee: (03.38) *So your prime motivation was to escape, was it?*

**Bob Whittock:** It was, yes, yes. Other parts of the world, I suppose – some sort of release from the norm.

Chris Eldon Lee: (03.50) *Did you have to make a choice between the Palestine Police and...*

**Bob Whittock:** No, no, I didn't get any sort of invitation to go to Palestine, or anything like that at all. This was my one and only opportunity to see the world.

Chris Eldon Lee: (04.05) *so you were almost completely ignorant of what you were letting yourself into?*

**Bob Whittock:** Absolutely completely. I had done a week's training in the Navy on ionospherics, and that was about it, and a week's training in the Navy means 'That's the ionosphere, and this is what we do' type of thing and I knew nothing about it at all.

Chris Eldon Lee: (04:28) *and you knew nothing about the Antarctic?*

**Bob Whittock:** Nothing about the Antarctic and, when I had the interview at the Crown Agents, with John Green and a member of the (who was it? I forget his name now – names are terrible) but when I went there I was interviewed for about three-quarters of an hour and wasn't getting anywhere at all with it, and dear old John Green, who was the Assistant<sup>1</sup> said to me, 'I see you were a member of the Scouts, Boy Scouts' and I said 'Yes, for a long time.' He said, 'In north of Birmingham?' and I said 'Yes', and he said, 'Did you know so-and-so?' and I said 'Yes,' 'Did you know so-and-so,' 'Yes, him too', 'What about so-and-so?' 'Oh yes, I knew him.' And he said 'Well I was in the Scout movement in Sutton Coldfield,' which is next door. So he then fed me with all the right questions – 'Well I suppose you are used to mixing with chaps then.' 'Yes, yes' and you will be used to camping?' 'Yes, yes, oh yes.' 'And what about cooking?' 'Oh yes, yes, no trouble at all.' So, by the time I got out all these yesses, these two were nodding to each other, and I was out through the door waiting for the letter.

Chris Eldon Lee: (05.57) *Hardly a rigorous interview...*

**Bob Whittock:** In those days they were looking: you wouldn't get the applications that you've got nowadays for the jobs, it was pretty rare I should think, and they had a certain number of vacancies to fill – it was difficult enough to fill the qualified vacancies – but the non-qualified was a bit random and they were more concerned, I think, with one's personality than anything else.

Chris Eldon Lee: (06.29) *Do you remember them questioning you about your sociability and rubbing along with people?*<sup>2</sup>

**Bob Whittock:** Only the aspect of the Boy Scouts, and the fact that, you know, were all off together and camping and whatever.

Chris Eldon Lee: (06.44) *When you found out the Falklands were indeed close to the Antarctic, did you have any second thoughts?*

**Bob Whittock:** Well, leading up to it was the problem because the interview was, as I recall, somewhere about the February of the year (or early part of the year) and I heard nothing up until June and, getting a bit concerned about this, I rang through to the Office and spoke to Eric Salmon, who was the secretary here then in those days,<sup>3</sup> and asked him what the situation was, and was I in fact accepted and going: and he said, 'Haven't you heard yet?' I said no, and he said, 'Oh well, I expect it's been delayed – you'll hear at any moment' as it were. So that was June, and it went on into July and I rang him again and he said 'Oh! You should have heard by now: have you been asked to go to the meeting at Cambridge?' I said no. 'Alright, well I'll look into it, leave it with me.' That was in June: July came, August came, and September: and then I said to him, 'Well look, if I'm going, I've got to give my notice in at work – I can't sort of leave like this...' 'Oh, I see' he said, 'Well, I should give your notice in.' So I said 'Good – OK.' Well, I gave my notice in, still hadn't had any notification of the job, gave my notice in so I then sent him a telegram, saying I'm now out of work, [Chuckles] I'm now out of a job to go to, and I haven't got any income. I spoke to

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Secfids at this time.

<sup>2</sup> They were aware of the fact that some of the previous Port Lockroy team had sent a member 'To Coventry.'

<sup>3</sup> Salmon was serving as a Met. Man at Base 'F', in 1954.

him on the 'phone and he said, 'Have you been invited to the meeting at Cambridge with Dr. Fuchs and the rest of them?' I said no, and he said, 'Well, I should go, if I were you.'

So I came to Cambridge without any knowledge of contract – anything like that at all, and I saw this crowd of chaps there, and Fuchs: he had his dog there, and his sledge and he was demonstrating: and we had a nice lunch together. I sat next to Fuchs and I was impressed with it all and I was saying to people, 'Have you got a contract yet?' 'Oh yes, it's all been signed [by us.]' So I went back again, and the ship was due to sail from Southampton on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October, and on the Friday prior to that – that was two days before – I had a telegram from Eric Salmon, saying, 'Report to the FIDS Office in London, nine o'clock on Friday morning, you're leaving from Southampton at three o'clock in the afternoon' – so that's the first indication I had that I was going south.

I came down to London at nine o'clock, presented myself and Bunny Fuchs said to me, 'Have you got a passport?' I said 'No.' He said, 'Well, you are going across the world you know, and you haven't got a passport? I said, 'I wasn't going across the world until two days ago!' So he said, 'Hang on, get them on the 'phone.' They got the Passport Office on the 'phone and he turned to me and he said, 'You've got to pick your passport up from the Passport Office at two o'clock this afternoon. Meanwhile we'll go and get some lunch.' So he and I went to lunch and met up with a pilot: I forget who it is, it's in his book anyway. We met up in this sort of threesome in this pub facing Petty France, the...

Chris Eldon Lee: (11.13) *Passport Office.*

**Bob Whittock:** Passport Office, two o'clock. I presented myself, picked up my passport, jumped on the train, got down to Southampton, jumped into a taxi and I said, 'You've got ten minutes to get me to Berth 36 on the quay.' We shot through the traffic –100 miles an hour and through the gates and along there, and there wasn't a soul to be seen. There was the *John Biscoe* sitting there, and I went on board and saw the Purser in his rags, ripped vest and old baggy trousers and a pot of tea in his hand – Shorey, his name was – he said 'Where do you want?' I said 'Where is everybody?' He said, 'It's all been cancelled until Monday: we're not sailing until Monday afternoon.'

So this complete and absolute shambles was prior to my going to the other side of the world, to something that was completely and absolutely unknown to me.

Chris Eldon Lee: (12.22) *Did it worry you?*

**Bob Whittock:** Not in the slightest. He said, 'You've got to come back on Monday morning.' He told me where to go as far as the weekend over-nighting was concerned, and that's what I did.

Chris Eldon Lee: (12.36) *I meant the amateurishness of it all... [Crosstalk]*

**Bob Whittock:** No, I don't think so, it didn't concern me at all: I've always been pretty relaxed in officialdom, so being in the Scouts and in the Navy and whatever, it

didn't concern me too much no, and in those days of course everything was very amateurish, certainly as far as the organisations were concerned.

Chris Eldon Lee: (13.10) *So, you set sail on Monday. Were there any ports of call on the way down: you knew you were going to be there for two years?*

**Bob Whittock:** We stopped at the Cape Verde Islands for water and fruit and that kind of thing, and then we sailed across through to Montevideo, spent a few days in Montevideo, and then down to Port Stanley: stayed there for a week, and then down to Port Lockroy.

Chris Eldon Lee: (13.39) *What do you recall from your first sightings of Port Lockroy? You knew you were there for two years...*<sup>4</sup>

**Bob Whittock:** We left Port Stanley and the first thing you see after a couple of days is the odd iceberg, which tends to leave you with your mouth open, and clamouring to the rails to see these things pass. By the time we'd got to Lockroy, it was the twenty-something of November,<sup>5</sup> and the nights were pretty light at that stage and we moved into Lockroy early and saw the Base sitting there 'til morning, as it were, and the sight of it was such that you thought, well this is home now for the next couple of years, and we're going to have to make do. But, apart from it all being so very impressive, we had a job to do and we got on with it.

Chris Eldon Lee: (14:46) *How did you embark on your scientific work?*

**Bob Whittock:** With great difficulty [*Laughs.*]

Chris Eldon Lee: (14:55) *Tell me about that, those early days...*

**Bob Whittock:** There was five of us on the base. Bill Etheridge was an experienced Ionosphericist that had been trained in the DSIR in Slough...

Chris Eldon Lee: (15.10) *D..?*

**Bob Whittock:** DSIR –it's the Research Institute, in Slough, for Ionospherics<sup>6</sup> and he was a Falkland Islander, a Kelper. He'd been down before to Port Lockroy, so he was experienced in the ionospherics as well as being on the Base before. John Smith had been to Signy Island prior to this,<sup>7</sup> so he was experienced and he was the Diesel Mechanic, a very good one. Bernard Taylor was the Wireless Operator and he'd been at Deception before, and then myself: and there was Alan Carroll who was an ex Pilot Officer and he was appointed Base Leader, and then the two experienced Antarctic Fids and myself. So that was the setup of it all, the five of us.

But unfortunately, Bill Etheridge who was not the easiest bloke to get on with generally, he was a bit morose, and Alan Carroll didn't seem to hit it off: and I do

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<sup>4</sup> In Bob's case, a one-winter contract.

<sup>5</sup> 28 November 1954,

<sup>6</sup> Radio Research Station, Ditton Park, Slough, Part of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research.

(cf Roy Bailey, transcription disk ref: AD6/24/1/40.1)

<sup>7</sup> In fact, Smith had served at Deception Island in 1944.

believe that Bill had thought that he would be appointed Base Leader. I'm not sure: we knew nothing of forthcoming events – anything at all – nothing. When I say we, certainly Bernard, John, and myself knew nothing about it. I don't think Alan Carroll knew anything about it, but out of the blue, Bernard must have sent to Port Stanley a telegram to Secfids, 'Under no circumstances will I serve a second year with Alan Carroll.' I believe that that is on the books, something like that. We knew nothing about it at all – I say we –

Chris Eldon Lee: (17:29) *Who sent the telegram?*

**Bob Whittock:** Bill Etheridge. I suppose therefore, that Bernard must have known something about it, having sort of transmitted it, but I don't know,<sup>8</sup> and this boiled up towards the end of the summer season. And, by then the last ship out was the *Lientur*,<sup>9</sup> which had Ken Blaiklock on board, a senior surveyor,<sup>10</sup> and he was asked to look in at Lockroy and to see what the situation was. This was after about two or three months on the Base. He came ashore and interviewed us all, and we were open-mouthed about it – we knew absolutely nothing, nothing at all, 'Do you know anything?' 'No I don't...'

Chris Eldon Lee: (18.18) So, you sensed no atmosphere?

**Bob Whittock:** Well, as I say, Bill [Etheridge] was a funny bloke, he was a bit depressive, and a bit morose, and I think the feelings that had gone on was more within him than it was anywhere else. I don't think Alan knew much about it, frankly. Alan was a funny bloke in himself, but he did a decent job. He was supposed to have been doing Met. work, and Lockroy Met. is not very interesting to anybody – too localised generally, so he was a bit spare in that particular case.<sup>11</sup> Bill Etheridge was doing the ionospherics: I was helping him with the development of the film and helping with the menial tasks of it and knew nothing more. At the end of the interviews, the decision was made that Bill Etheridge, at that stage, would be taken out, leaving Alan on the Base, and the rest of us. Bill Etheridge went back to Port Stanley and home because that's where he lived, generally, leaving the ionospheric side of things completely and absolutely suspended in mid-air.<sup>12</sup>

When we spoke to the senior bloke in Stanley about the ionospherics, he asked me if I was able to do the work. I said, 'No, I've no idea.' So he said 'Well, you'll have to do what you can' and I said 'Well, I can do the development of the films and all the rest of it, and prepare them but I can only pile them up and wait till...' and he said, 'You will have to leave it: work on Lockroy for the year will be suspended.'

Well, that's what the Base was for – ionospherics, it wasn't for anything else – I mean we were on a little island in a bay: we weren't able to get out and about very easily, so we couldn't do anything else – we couldn't survey or anything – we had nobody on shore to do so. So, I decided to pull down a tome from off the shelves that said 'Ionospheric Reduction' and I thought I shall have to try and get somewhere with

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<sup>8</sup> It was a hand-written letter, sent via normal post to Port Stanley.

<sup>9</sup> Not so. *Lientur* was a Chilean patrol ship. The ship in question was the *Norsel*, chartered to set up Base 'N'.

<sup>10</sup> Blaiklock was acting as summer Field Liaison Officer.

<sup>11</sup> So Carroll took over all the electronic and mechanical maintenance work on the ionosonde.

<sup>12</sup> The Governor of the Falklands offered Etheridge two simple choices – agree to work there for two years, or quit.



it. So I opened the first page to 'Preface' and started to read, and after the first page, I decided I didn't understand a word of, so I went back to the beginning again and did it again and again, and over the first chapter and back again, and looked at the pictures. This went on now for about three weeks to a month all told, during which time I was playing with what I thought was a plastic ruler. It was wider than a ruler – about four inches wide and about twelve inches long and very flexible – and I was using it to drum or tap or to play with on the desk while I was reading, or while I was looking at the photographs which we had taken of the ionosphere work. And, It was after about three weeks where I was just about on the verge of giving it up: I had no idea at all, till I noticed that there were markings on this ruler that was quite unusual and I wondered what this was, and matched them up against the film, to see that there was some sort of connotation with it, so then I went back to the previous year's photographs and matched up there and took some readings off it and these were the readings that had been sent back from the previous years work, and realised then that this little bit of plastic that I had been playing with for three weeks was the key to it all.<sup>13</sup>

So, from then on, for the rest of the year, I was able to work through, and send off all the details to Port Stanley,<sup>14</sup> and all in all, everything went very well. I had one or two hiccoughs here and there which were put right by Stanley and that was about it. The overall story was that the main man was taken out, leaving (I don't like to describe Alan as an odd ball) but leaving Alan instead of Bill being taken out, you'd have thought it would have been the other way around, because of the experience that Bill had, and myself as a complete novice. That was the story of...

Chris Eldon Lee: (22:35) *So, in the end you were able to almost fulfil your brief...*

**Bob Whittock:** Yes, I think it was luck, really, and I don't mean to describe that as being sort of too light-hearted – there was a lot of work involved – but it was just a matter of finding a way through the mass of detail involved in ionospheric work.

Chris Eldon Lee: (24.06) *Can you briefly, for a layman, take me through the processes?*

**Bob Whittock:** It's easy enough in the sense that we had what is still known now as the Beast [*Beastie*], an ionospheric machine of about five foot high by four foot square, which had layers and layers of equipment in it and on the hour, twenty-four hours a day, it automatically transmits a signal to the ionosphere which is then bounced back, recorded on an oscilloscope – shown on a 'scope – and photographed. So you got this continuous photograph every hour of the day of the returns coming back, and the returns coming back shows, because of the delays, you find the height of the ionosphere, the penetration frequency when the signal gets too strong for it and penetrates through that layer and into the next layer and then that is recorded every hour, you've got a slip of photographic paper which shows you all the blips of the height and the penetration frequency of each layer, and shows whatever layers are in position at that time of the year or the eleven-year sunspot cycle. That's the whole job really, in itself, the function of the machine is to do all the work and we merely

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<sup>13</sup> Photographic records were boxed up and sent to the DSIR via Port Stanley at the end of each winter.

<sup>14</sup> Maximums, minimums and medians were sent by radio to Port Stanley each month.

changed the film, develop it, take the readings off it, send it back to Port Stanley and that's registered from there.<sup>15</sup>

Chris Eldon Lee: (26:05) *What were they doing with the readings you sent them?*

**Bob Whittock:** I haven't got a clue.

Chris Eldon Lee: *What was the purpose of the work?*

**Bob Whittock:** Well of course, around the world, they produce what's called maximum usable frequency tables for operators to use [in] any part of the world. You can tell from these tables what, at certain times of the day, month, year and eleven-year sunspot cycle, what layers will be in operation to bounce the radio waves off it around the world, so that wherever you are around the world you can look up these tables and see what is advised, at that time of the day, the frequency for operating on.

Chris Eldon Lee: *So the figures you were producing had a definite rhythm to them?*

**Bob Whittock:** Oh yes: during the course of the year I came across one blip which, in my complete and absolute lack of knowledge, meant nothing. When I sent it back to Port Stanley, the chap in charge there, Vic Harrison, came on to me and said, 'This is wrong, this could not be in place at this time of year.' So I checked it again and I said 'Well, it looks as if I can't see anything wrong with it.' He said, 'It's impossible, at this time of the year it will not be in place.' This background argument went on for a while, until Vic Harrison arrived on the Base at the end of the season and looked at it and it was proven to be correct. That chuffed me, but it only proved that I was right – when I didn't know what the hell I was talking about!

Chris Eldon Lee: (28:08) *And what was the conclusion about that?*

**Bob Whittock:** Well nothing more than that, it was just an unknown blip [event] in the system.

Chris Eldon Lee: (26:17) *More sunspot activity or..?*

**Bob Whittock:** It could have been, it could have been anything, really, but on that time of the year that level of the ionosphere would not normally be in position but it was at that time, that's all.

Chris Eldon Lee: (28.32) *Did you have a sense at that time that was important work?*

**Bob Whittock:** Yes I did, yes, yes, I did, because I suppose I was feeling so naïve, not realising the ramifications of it all and, being unable to carry out the work, I thought [*Coughs*] then I thought then that it would be very difficult to keep up.

Chris Eldon Lee: (29:02) *And looking back on it now, do you still think it was important?*

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<sup>15</sup> The ionosonde had 26 separate chassis in it, used 72 thermionic valves, two clocks, one film calendar, two cathode ray tubes, seven electric motors and an automatic 70mm film camera.



**Bob Whittock:** [*Coughs*] Yes I think so, as the years go by, you wonder what it was all about – all the endeavour. [*More coughs and apologies*]

Chris Eldon Lee: (29:21) *The other couple of interesting moments, shall we say whilst you were south, including being blown out in your own boat: can you tell me the story?*

**Bob Whittock:** Yes, sure. Alan and I had been to Børgen Bay on Anvers Island, to help that crowd from over there,<sup>16</sup> and had come back in two boats to the Base [Port Lockroy] and we'd got back to the Base and there was a gale blowing. So, Alan got up onto the island and I emptied the boats and passed the gear up to him – he was up on a shelf above me. Come virtually, virtually to the last item, which was a rolled-up groundsheet, and I threw it up to him, the wind caught it and blew it over my shoulder, into the water. It was of no consequence in fact, we could have let it sink: it wouldn't have made any difference one way or another really, but I said 'I'll fetch it.' So we finished what we were doing – I think I had one case left in the boat, which contained some cooking equipment, no food, no matches, Primus stove, but that was it. So I started the engine up (Alan was still on the island) swung round and picked the groundsheet up with a boathook and put it into the boat, took a sweep round to come back to the island. The rain and the wind and the spray cut out the outboard motor and I was blown away from the island, away from the Base, across the bay of Port Lockroy and no matter what I did with the oars, I could not direct myself – it was too strong.

So I arrived on the other side of the bay into an inlet<sup>17</sup> which was thick with brash ice. I couldn't walk on it, I couldn't get through it or pole through it: I was stuck in it, and within a few yards of some bergy bits which were as big as this room and more, and pounding up and down in the storm as it were, making a hell of a noise. At that stage in the situation it started to rain and I was getting wet, because I wasn't kitted out for it. So I decided I was going to get down into the boat, cover myself up with the offending groundsheet and go to sleep, because by this time I was 'whacked,' trying to do the rowing and all the rest of it. So I got down into the boat, went to sleep. The next thing that I know – and this was very strange, and you're going to have to bear with me – because I don't understand it either, and I'm not a religious man, so I can't give credit to things like this.

(32:51) I woke up with a blinding flash in my left eye, still lying down in the bottom of the boat, covered by the groundsheet and with my anorak up over my face: in fact my inner and my outer hoods over my face, fast asleep. Blinding flash! I woke up, blinked my eyes, couldn't see for a while with the flash of the light, wondering what the hell it was. Everything was deathly quiet: the storm had abated, the rain had stopped, the sea was calm and I sat up in the boat and looked around me, and it was like a millpond, like a piece of glass I was sitting on. I could see the cliffs around me and various mountains and glaciers, but it was like a dream sequence, absolutely. I couldn't see out of my left eye for some considerable time but I eventually thought I had better start getting back to wherever I had come from. I didn't know where that

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<sup>16</sup> Base 'N' survey and geology team.

<sup>17</sup> Close to Gauthier Point.

direction was, so I started rowing, and as I was rowing through this calm water, I looked back and at the far distance I saw a light flash, and repeated itself, so I realised I was looking at the [Argentinian] light that was at the bottom of the Peltier Channel.<sup>18</sup> Do you know Port Lockroy at all? (At the bottom of the Peltier Channel and onto the Neumayer Channel.) So I thought, I'm going the wrong way in that case, and had I gone round the headland in the next few yards, as it were, I would never had seen the light and I would still be rowing now, up the Gerlache [Strait.]

I turned round and thought the best thing that I could do is get back to the light and reorientate myself, otherwise I wouldn't know where I was and I thought I might be able to manage to sort of understand where I was then, so I rowed back to the light the [Argentinian] light and, when I got there I could turn up the Peltier Channel towards the Base. I turned up there, to meet the ice coming down the channel, in the opposite direction. I knew I couldn't get through: the best thing I could do was wait till morning, so I pulled the boat into the side on Doumer Island (the island facing the base) but we are talking about half a mile or a mile off the base, as it were, so I pulled the boat up, climbed up onto Doumer and bedded down for the night. The following morning when I woke up I saw not only was the ice down the Peltier Channel but it had also come up, the way that I'd come, so I was trapped – there was just an open piece of open water where I was – across to Wiencke Island where the Base is, tucked into [a bay.] So I rowed across to Wiencke, parked the boat on a shelf there, buried all my gear that I had, camera and cooking equipment and motor off the boat. Took a rowlock out of the boat and climbed up onto the glacier which was quite a height. Now I've seen a photograph fairly recently, and that doesn't exist any more but this was, I should think without too much exaggeration, got to be about a hundred foot high, sheer. I was chipping a hole out and stepping into it and chipping another hole out till I got to the top, climbed over the top and looked [back] down my passage and realised there was no way I was going back again to the boat or anywhere else.

(37:18) I started walking on the line of the *Sierra du Fief*<sup>19</sup> towards the Base. In between the *Sierra* and the glacier there's a position where there's an awful lot of crevasses, badly crevassed all through there where the two glaciers join into another and I knew I had to be very, very careful when I got to that position – I wouldn't go down a crevasse. After a while I decided I had best stop, dig myself in to a hole beneath the cliffs, as it were there, and wait till morning till I had daylight. I did that, but lying there I couldn't sleep, I couldn't rest, and I had the vision in my mind of these rocks towering up above me. And one piece off the top of it would go straight through me. So I got up and I blindly walked across the crevasse field to the glacier at the other side and started going up the glacier. By this time I was exhausted, so I decided, to try and get myself along, I was going to walk a hundred yards and rest for five minutes. This eventually worked itself down to ten paces, and flopping down and lying for five minutes until I got to the top of the crevasse.

When I got to the top of the crevasse, strange as it's said, the lads at the Base had decided to leave the lights on in case I was coming back. I could see them from right up above them, by a couple of miles I suppose, and I worked my way towards them but, at the back of the bay where the Base is, there's some cliffs and as I got

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<sup>18</sup> Bob states 'Chilean'. This Argentinian acetylene-powered light was erected on Py Point in early 1947.

<sup>19</sup> The Fief Range

nearer and nearer to these cliffs they got steeper and steeper. I tried to work my way across to the penguin rookery, which was a slope down to the water but didn't go far enough and started sliding forward on my backside. I think this was a complete lack of understanding, by then, of the circumstances. I then shot forward and turned over in mid-air and landed on a shelf about twenty or thirty foot down a crevasse. So, I dug myself in there for a while, and I couldn't understand why it was so quiet, and was staring out to sea when there was about three inches in front of my nose, was a shear ice wall. So I worked myself along to the end of this crevasse on the shelf I was on, and realised I was going to have to step onto the snow slope at the end of it to try and climb up.

I did do so and as soon as I got my hands over the top, everything fell away from beneath me and I was left suspended there. I managed to get over the top, climb down the glacier wall to the sea ice and across the sea ice to the Base, and I arrived there about 2 o'clock in the morning about three days later.

ChrisEldonLee: (41:14) *Without food?*

**Bob Whittock:** No food: I'd had half a bar of chocolate on the boat coming back with Alan, threw him half, had half myself and that's all I had in three days. I was frozen, my fingers and feet were frozen and we'd had a period of time where this phased itself out. But coming back to this country I had trouble with my feet for about eighteen months to two years later.

Chris Eldon Lee (41:48) *Were your colleagues surprised to see you?*

**Bob Whittock:** Very surprised, Alan had come out after me in the other boat and got suspended on Doumer Island himself overnight: no sign of me the next morning, So he returned to Base and they couldn't do a great deal, there was no way they could find which direction that I had gone by this time. So they sort of stuck it out, put the lights on as I said, overnight and all the rest of it, and I walked in a couple of days later with the saying, 'Any more tea in that jug?' [*Chuckles*]

Chris Eldon Lee: (42:29) *The blinding flash that woke you up – what's your explanation?*

**Bob Whittock:** I haven't one.

Chris Eldon Lee: (42:40) *Divine intervention?*

**Bob Whittock:** If you say so! I have no idea. I cannot understand it: I don't know what it was. I mean, it's difficult to explain to people because there is no answer to it all. I know I was lying in that boat, completely covered, and so therefore the [Argentinian] light had nothing to do with it, and in any case when I saw it, it was a mile or more away, two miles away, and was only just a little blip in the distance. The flash in my left eye that woke me up I do not understand at all.

**Chris Eldon Lee:** (43:16) *If you hadn't been woken...*

**Bob Whittock:** If I hadn't been woken, the silence of the moment was on a suspended sort of mirror-like surface being drifted slowly out towards the [Gerlache Strait], and that would have been out of sight of the [Argentinean] light and probably I'd never realise what position that I was in, at the back of the [Fief Range,] instead of in the front of it.

Chris Eldon Lee: (43:49) *So, there would have been no more Bob Whittock.*

**Bob Whittock:** Not at all, unless I was found upright still, many years later.

Chris Eldon Lee: (44:04) Oh, I see...

**Bob Whittock:** I don't know what it was: I don't even try to explain it all – I can't explain it.

Chris Eldon Lee: (44:07) *What a great story, thank you very much...*

**Bob Whittock:** Not at all, not at all...

Here there is a break in the recording. This is because the original recording has been edited by removing one section, under Resolution 5 of the Antarctic Treaty, 2000. Should this be resolved at some time in the future, this would enable a case to be made for the release of the original full recording and transcript (to be held at BAS Archives, classified as an 'in confidence' holding under the FOIA.)

...Chris Eldon Lee: (44:10) *I think he's still with us...*

**Bob Whittock:** I don't think so. There is another John Smith, who came a little bit later...

Chris Eldon Lee: (44:18) *I think he was at Detaille Island*

**Bob Whittock:** That's right.

Chris Eldon Lee: (44:22) *That's who I'm thinking of.*

**Bob Whittock:** Yes, John came home with me on the *Shackleton* and he was at [Deception Island] before we went down, and after that he went abroad with some oil company and worked in Pakistan and places like that.<sup>20</sup> I don't think it's the one you're thinking about.

Chris Eldon Lee: (44:49) *I'm sorry about that, it's a very common name...*

**Bob Whittock:** [*Chuckles*] Yes, that's the trouble now, that's why I can't find him.

Chris Eldon Lee: (44:57) *Yes, yes, of course. Amateur Radio played quite an important part in you life? [Cross talk]*

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<sup>20</sup> John Smith worked in what was then called *East Pakistan*, for Decca Navigation, and then went to Turkey, working as a power station operator in Adana, for the Tumpene Company.

**Bob Whittock:** A great deal. Well, Bernard Taylor, the Wireless Operator, was a wireless operator *par excellence*. He was a cracking bloke – he worked for the government<sup>21</sup> for some time before he went down, and I think he used to work all the Russian transmissions. He was a very, very, capable bloke. I don't think he was qualified to do anything [else,] but he was spot on with his abilities, and he was appointed, if you like, the centre Base for operating, so he collected all the [other seven] Bases transmissions and sent them on to Port Stanley: he was a first-class chap.<sup>22</sup> He also had an Amateur Wireless registration VP8BD as I recall it, and because of that he used to talk to people around the world: a lot of the time it was on Morse Code of which he was very, very qualified – so much so, he had sent away to America for what they call a 'bug' [key] which, instead of being an 'up-and-downer' was a 'side-to-sider.' Have you seen those?<sup>23</sup> The dots are automatic and the same with the dashes –they're automatic, so you can hold it and have repetitive dots and the same with the dashes. And, by the time he had worked this and got used to it all, everybody else was screaming, 'Whoa, whoa, whoa!' because he was so fast. Anyway this VP8BD was talking to people all round the world and, because of it we started getting regular contacts with people, two of which were American doctors in Tucson in Arizona.

One we worked at midday every day, and the other one was seven o'clock in the evening. We also had a refrigeration engineer, an American refrigeration engineer from the south – not Ushuaia – Punta Arenas I think it was, and a teacher up in one of the smaller South American countries and we spoke to them on such a regular basis (there was another one in New York) and this became our daily routine, if you like, speaking to these people, mainly in the evenings after we'd finished work and Bernard would go onto the Amateur bands and then speak to people all over the world.

Chris Eldon Lee: (48:16) *How important was that for you chaps on the...*

**Bob Whittock:** Well, it was great, it was the pastime that would have been missing, otherwise: I mean, you can't play cards all the time, play darts all the time or have ring-a-ring-a-roses. We'd listen to music and things like that, but this became the primary pastime and was very, very, interesting indeed, very interesting. We spoke to people and had got to know them virtually as friends. The chap in New York, for example, used to dangle his microphone out of the window and we could hear all the sort of traffic noises of New York City whilst we were ten thousand miles away in the midst of the ice.

Chris Eldon Lee: (49:04) *So: some of it was voice work?*

**Bob Whittock:** It was nearly all voice work – what we used was all voice work – because Bernard would do his own to his specialised people, but we spoke to the American Coast Guards in the Aleutian Islands in the Bering Sea. They came through

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<sup>21</sup> Diplomatic Wireless Service.

<sup>22</sup> 'Control Base,' a function of Port Lockroy until the IGY, was transferred to prevent cross-interference with enhanced ionospheric research which, from time to time, would entail soundings every 15 minutes.

<sup>23</sup> Technology was advancing fast even then. In 1966 a Creed automatic tape punch unit was installed in the Radio Room.

one day with a complete thundering signal and we spoke to them and they wouldn't believe us to start with: who we were and where we were, in fact told us to 'get off the line' at one particular time so then, when they realised we were telling them the truth, they said, 'Hold on a bit' and they dashed off and got all the rest of their crew into the radio shack and we had a 'party' with them if you like, for an hour or more, whilst this magnificent signal thundered round the globe from the Bering Sea to the Antarctic Ocean. It was an amazing contact.<sup>24</sup>

Chris Eldon Lee: (50:04) *That must be very exciting – I know there were other adventures while you were down there but [Crosstalk]*

**Bob Whittock:** No, day-to-day routine can get a bit stagnant, and you do need something to do: you can't read all the time, or you can't booze all the time or anything like that. You've got to have some sort of pastime that's going to interest you for many hours, and it was wonderful. I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

Chris Eldon Lee: (50:40) *Did you sense that, in some respects, you were kind of celebrities to them, because you were in such an unusual location?*

**Bob Whittock:** Yes it was, they're, in themselves, they're a bit professional, these Amateur Operators – it sounds a bit controversial, but they collect contacts from round the world, and they send themselves cards to confirm the meeting, the contact on the air, and they call those QSL cards, and those cards confirm that the contact has been made, and so the collection of a QSL card from the British Antarctic was quite a feather in their caps.

Chris Eldon Lee: (51:44) *So you were able to post them a card?*

**Bob Whittock:** Oh yes. At the end of each sort of {Chuckles} season, when the ships came in, Bernard was able to sign a card and send it off, and it was quite a collection, and the people that used to annoy us was the South Americans who had great pieces of equipment, so they used to thunder through, and they were clamouring to speak to us at all times. Now, one evening Bernard came to me and said, 'Bob', he said, 'I've got somebody in here from Cardiff,' which is where I used to live and where my brother was living. So I dashed in and spoke to this chap and he said, 'Your brother comes from Cardiff? And I said yes. He said, 'Well give us his telephone number and I'll ring him up, and we'll meet up on this band tomorrow evening, at the same time.' Right – OK, fine – I gave him his telephone number and all the rest of it, and the following day he rings up my brother and he says, 'I've been talking to your brother last night.' My brother says, 'You bloody well haven't,' [Chuckles] he says, 'He's in the Antarctic.' He said, 'Yes, that's where I spoke to him.' So my brother went up to his house that night and got on the radio. Nothing.

Chris Eldon Lee: (52:57) *So you had a conversation?*

**Bob Whittock:** No, we had no contact at all – we never did make the contact, but we did speak to a lot of people around and about, not so many in this country because of restrictions on the size of their equipment meant they couldn't get through to that

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<sup>24</sup> What Radio Amateurs would nowadays refer to as a 'grey line' pathway.



distance. But the Americans and the South Americans and some people in South Africa were able to transmit very easily.

Chris Eldon Lee: (53:31) *I ask everybody this question: what was special about the Antarctic? Do you regard it as being the most important, the most memorable moment in your life?*

**Bob Whittock:** Certainly the most memorable: I don't suppose in the scheme of things it was the most important, but certainly the most memorable, yes, and after all these years, and I'm talking about the involvement of life generally, over the years after I've come back, it seeps into the background and it's only at times like this when we come down to a dinner or a meeting, or get a phone call from out of the blue from somebody that you haven't spoken to for fifty years, then it all comes back again. Certainly it was the most memorable and impressive time in my life, and I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

But life goes on and you're left, in the end, just with those memories and a few scruffy-looking black and white photographs which doesn't mean a great deal to anybody else, but does to me, and you sort of read on the subject and we've all written little pieces on the subject one way or the other, but the memory of it all is very strong in my mind and long may it be so.

Chris Eldon Lee: (55:00) *They are great memories, Bob Whittock. Thank you very much indeed.*

**Bob Whittock:** Not at all.

- TEXT ENDS -

Points of interest:

Complications following his interview with FIDS. (04:05-13:10)

Further complications when a Base Member threatened mutiny. (15:10-24:06)

Going adrift in a small boat in July. (29:21-44:07)

Within boating text: the, as yet unexplained, 'Great Flash of Light.' (32:51)

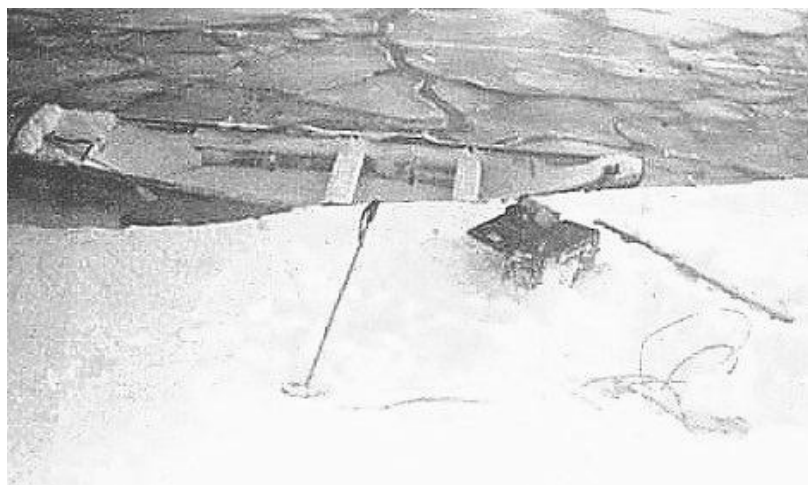
Amateur Radio (44:57-55:35)

PICTURES BELOW



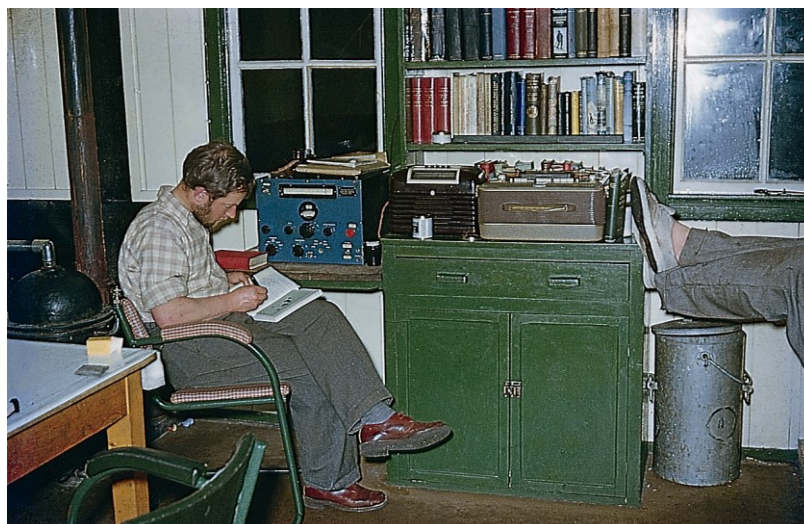
Bob taking pictures 1955, Port Lockroy.

*Photo: A M Carroll 1955*



The boat, where Bob moored it in the Peltier Channel, taken when he and Smith returned to collect personal effects, stores and tools.

*Photo: J E Smith 1995*



Vic Harrison, Port Stanley Ionosphericist, during routine summer visit to Port Lockroy – writing diary in Living Room.

*Photo: A M Carroll., 1995*